PUNJAB: NEW CM, OLD PROBLEMS

NSE SCANDAL: CHITRA RAMKRISHNA'S MYSTERY YOGI

THE KASHMIR FILES: COMMUNAL CATHARSIS

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MARCH 28, 2022 ₹75

INDIA TODAY

GOVERNMENT JOBS

THE HUNGER & THE MESS

A lacklustre economy is driving millions of Indians to seek scarce government jobs but the recruitment process remains daunting and chaotic

Rakesh Pal, 28

B.Sc. in Chemistry

Job applied for in 2019

Indian Railways as station master/clerk/guard/timekeeper

Total vacancies

35,281

Total applications

12.5 million

Status **Still waiting**

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FROM THE

EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

Jobs are the lifeblood of an economy. High unemployment and soaring prices are like bad cholesterol that clogs the arteries of economic growth, causes immense misery to citizens and spells doom for political fortunes. The inconvenient truth for the Modi government is that the Indian economy had already been on the decline before the pandemic hit and almost went into rigor mortis when it did strike.

Consider this: in the fourth quarter of 2019-20, just before Covid-19 set in, GDP growth had plunged to an underwhelming 4 per cent from the peak of 8.6 per cent two years earlier. The pandemic months saw an even steeper fall, with GDP growth for the 2020-21 fiscal year turning a negative 7.3 per cent. For the first time in 40 years, the economy had slipped into a recession.

As the economy haemorrhaged, unemployment soared. The Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy (CMIE) estimated that 10 million people lost their jobs in the second wave of the pandemic alone. Unfortunately, even as the economy recovered in the current financial year, with GDP touching 8.4 per cent in the second quarter, the Ukraine war saw international oil and commodity prices hit the roof, leading to a spurt in inflation that once again threatened to derail India's fragile economy.

Joblessness has always dogged India's progress, but it has become endemic in the past decade. According to the NSSO, unemployment was already at a 45-year high of 6.3 per cent in 2017-18. But the onslaught of the pandemic pushed it to a peak of 24 per cent in May 2020, the CMIE reports. It has eased since but still hovers around an unhealthy 7 per cent. The damage has already been done. CMIE reports a massive 46 per cent decline in jobs in manufacturing, which accounts for 17 per cent of the economy. Told in numbers, the story reads even starker. Manufacturing jobs shrunk from 51 million in 2016-17 to 27.3 million in 2020-21, far short of the Centre's target of increasing manufacturing employment to 100 million. The pandemic also led to companies laying off workers due to lack of demand or to cut costs. The unorganised sector, which includes micro and small firms and contributes 30 per cent to the GDP, was worse off. Though there is no accurate estimate of exactly how many jobs were lost, it is certainly in the tens of millions.

INDIA TODAY
THE JOBS FAMINE

May 2, 2016

However, even these shocking figures do not capture the ground reality. Unemployment is measured by the number of people seeking jobs as a percentage of the total working population. But with so many living on the margins in India, they cannot afford to be without a job. So they take up occupations like street vending. Disguised unemployment is another chronic issue. Particularly in agriculture, which employs 45 per cent of the workforce but contributes only 20 per cent to the GDP. There is no escaping the harsh truth: India faces a grievous unemployment crisis.

The uncomfortable result is that, in these troubled times, a government job of any kind has become much coveted for the stability it promises. Sadly, it is a chimera. It was evident in the thousands of angry young Indians setting trains on fire this January because of malpractices in recruitment for government jobs. According to CMIE, while there are 53 million jobless Indians out there, the government employs just 4 million people in both the Centre and in the states and is simply unable to meet the ever-growing demand.

This has resulted in an alarmingly disproportionate number of people applying for a single post, with most of the applicants being overqualified for the job. For instance, in December 2021, when the Gwalior district court announced 15 openings for posts such as peons, gardeners, cleaners and drivers, it received over 11,000 applications. The required qualification was a Class 10 pass, but most of those who applied were graduates, postgraduates and even MBAs. This is not an aberration. In 2018, some 3,700 Ph.D. holders and 50,000 graduates applied for 62 posts for messengers in the Uttar Pradesh police. There are scores of such examples. They reflect the mismatch in quantity and quality. It is tragic that after 75 years of Independence, thousands still despair over finding a job.

The tale of woe does not just end here. The dark irony is that large vacancies in government jobs remain unfilled. In fact, between 2014 and 2020, vacancies doubled from 421,658 to 872,243. But the central government has hired only half of what it should have in the past five years. Of these, nearly 30 per cent of the hirings owed to a railway recruitment drive in 2019-20.

One of the primary reasons is that the recruitment process is daunting, chaotic and, in many instances, just plain corrupt. The anger that we saw erupt on the eve of Republic Day this year was because the Railways conducted an exam in 2019 for 35,281 non-technical positions like clerks, guards and timekeepers, attracting a whopping 12.5 million applications. But confusion reigned over both the qualifying criteria and cut-offs, in addition to delays in announcing the results, which led to frustration, rage and violence. Elsewhere, there have been reports of widespread malpractices—from leaked question papers to political nepotism. On top of all this, most governments have put a squeeze on costs to achieve greater efficiency.

Deputy Editor Kaushik Deka, who put our cover story together with bureau reports, has exhaustively dealt with the key issues behind the hunger for government jobs and the mess in filling these posts. There is no way the government can solve the dire problem of unemployment by increasing the number of posts. But the least it can do is streamline the process of filling them. The larger issue of unemployment can be tackled only through a massive surge in economic growth. That is possible only if the Modi government provides an enabling policy environment that can stimulate rapid growth in the private sector.

The issue requires some urgency as, with our birth rates dropping, the window to capitalise on our much-touted demographic dividend of younger workers is beginning to shrink. We need to rapidly generate more jobs, but not government ones. Or else we are staring at a demographic disaster.

(Aroon Purie)

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COVER STORY

THE HUNGER & THE MESS

A lacklustre economy is driving millions of Indians to seek government jobs, but the recruitment process remains daunting and chaotic

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NO REDRESS? Women in hijab outside the gates of the Karnataka HC in Bengaluru

MANJUNATH KIRAN/AFP

HIJAB CONTROVERSY

THE CLOAK OF JUSTICE

By Sunil Menon

The hijab case of Karnataka has moved, almost inevitably, into a higher orbit of national reckoning. The raft of issues raised by the case—arising out of an Udupi college's refusal to allow girls to wear the Islamic headscarf on campus—will now be subject to the Supreme Court's judicial wisdom. A bunch of appeals have landed before it, and more may be on the way. What they are challenging is the Karnataka High Court's March 15 verdict that upheld what is fated to be known, in common understanding, as 'the hijab ban'.

The three-judge HC bench, while framing the issue, had chosen to accord centrality to the question of whether the hijab was essential to the practice of Islam. This scaled up a practical question—one that could have been framed tightly, and tackled, at the level of a conflict between college rules and individual rights—to a more fundamental, risky realm. In the end, the court ruled that Islamic tenets didn't mandate the hijab.

The verdict also privileged the idea of the uniform, saying schools and pre-university colleges (PUCs, the equivalent of Plus 2) are “qualified public spaces” where the idea of discipline is paramount and must prevail upon individual choice. The relevant 1983 Act of Karnataka prescribed no uniform, and only a Government Order (G.O.) of February 5, 2022, had brought in, even as the controversy raged, an executive cover for uniforms prescribed by individual colleges. The court finally validated that G.O. too, saying it was not violative of the principle of equality, nor discriminatory in nature.

> **Commentators say the verdict could set off of “an unmanageable deluge” of copycat court cases against practices in other religions: the scope for mischief is not small**

Strictly delimited to its actual scope, the verdict applies only to Karnataka's schools and PUCs. Not to offices, malls, streets, any other public space—or, indeed, anywhere else in India. But because of the general principles it lays down, its tenor can be heard everywhere. Also, the issue involves a whole series of constitutional rights. Take

COVERED, UNCOVERED

DEC. ’21-JAN. ’22
Six hijab-clad Muslim girls at Udupi’s PU College stage protests after being barred from class. Hindu students stage counter-protests

JAN. 31
The protesting Muslim girls approach the HC

FEB.5
State issues G.O. under 133(2) of 1983 Edu Act, giving colleges the right to impose uniforms. Protests spread

FEB. 10
HC says interim order freezes all religious symbols on campuses. Hijab-clad girls get debarred across state

MAR. 15
HC upholds hijab ban, says not essential to faith. Challenged in SC

Articles 14, 15, 19(1), 25-28, guaranteeing Indian citizens the rights to equality, non-discrimination, freedom of expression, and freedom of conscience/practice of religion. The last is especially a loaded one. What started in Udupi may finally reach everywhere from Usilampatti to Uttar Dinajpur. Commentators do not rule out the possibility of “an unmanageable deluge” of copycat court cases against practices in other religions: the scope for mischief, and a spillover effect across India’s social and political domains, is not small.

Supreme Court advocate Sanjay Hegde, who represents the petitioners, feels the judgment is flawed even on the basic point of the February 5 G.O. “Question is, where is the power to prescribe a uniform? If it does not exist in the original Act, can you do it by a rule? Can a rule exceed the originally given power?” he asks. But once the court exceeded that remit, there was a sense of inevitability. “In the sociology of law, there is a lot of writing on how judicial reasoning is always contextual—the thinking of judges inevitably flows from a time and place. And that’s true even of times that aren’t so politically fraught,” says Supreme Court lawyer Shahrukh Alam. From the bare-bones elements of a case, judges do tend to go on to reflect the deeper consensus in society.

Meanwhile, there is dismay among sections of Muslim civil society and commentariat. “The verdict is disappointing. It was not correct for the judges to interpret a religious matter. They should have called religious scholars to explain the issue,” says Dr Zafarul-Islam Khan, former chairman, Delhi Minorities Commission, reflecting the sense of alienation in the community. The verdict risks giving “judicial sanction to bigotry”, he says.

Not everyone agrees. Kerala Governor Arif Mohammed Khan, who famously broke with the orthodoxy on the Shah Bano case in the 1980s, welcomed the verdict unreservedly. “The question here is limited strictly to schools/ colleges. The critics are themselves widening its scope...as if the governments of India and Karnataka are denying women the right to choose their dress. They claimed Article 25 violation even on triple talaq,” he told India Today TV. There are also plenty of in-betweens—those ambivalent about the hijab itself who nevertheless feel the ruling to be an infringement on an inviolable space of personal and community choice.

Away from those debates, the verdict can put the education of innumerable Muslim girls in peril. Says writer-historian Rana Safvi: “There are different conversations going on here. The law, constitutional rights, patriarchy, all that. But I’m concerned about the girls themselves. I’ve seen many first-generation learners, in UP and Delhi, whose families allow them to go to school only because of the hijab. Whether you like it or not, it’s the reality...and it will have an effect on real lives. In the process, their right to education is harmed.”

Many share a disquiet about the primacy laid on the idea of ‘uniforms’ and ‘discipline’. “You can read it in classic Foucauldian terms: forming an idea of what constitutes the model citizen, as one who’s disciplined, homogenous, blends in, and asks no questions. That a constitutional court has put its stamp on that is, to me, deeply problematic,” says Alam. This is also the turf on which talk can move towards a uniform civil code—as was seen in proclamations by BJP politicians in February.

There’s also a realistic plane here. Some believe the ruling establishment may not, in actual practice, wish to go down that track and open a can of worms—while keeping the debate alive. India presents an infinitely complex social landscape, hosting everyone from Muslim women in full burqa, to kirpan-wielding Sikhs, to Digambari (‘sky-clad’) Jain monks and Naga sadhus without a stitch on. An aggregate of exceptions. How does one begin to legislate uniformity upon it? Is it even desirable? These are perennial questions.

Whether the hijab case really traverses the distance from its humble origins to touch such universal realms will also depend on some technical aspects of the law. Specifically, what petitions come before the Supreme Court, whether they are Special Leave Petitions (SLPs) or Public Interest Litigations (PILs), and who actually files them. The first one off the block was Niba Naaz, an Udupi college girl who was not among the original petitioners. She filed an SLP on the grounds that the verdict affected her directly, as she fell within its territorial jurisdiction. (An SLP can otherwise only be filed by an original petitioner.)

Some others are PILs—even the All India Muslim Personal Law Board is contemplating one. What a PIL will do is ‘generalise’ the ambit of the verdict. By being treated on its abstract aspects (‘essential practice’) rather than concrete ones (‘was the Udupi college right?’), what was *not* applicable elsewhere makes an ingress to a universal context. The legal fraternity feels the Supreme Court may not rush into that. It has deferred a listing of the case—telltale signs for more than one observer that, if it chooses, it can let the matter linger while fulfilling the usual protocol. Sometimes democracy and law can seem to be in conflict: too much proscriptive law can mean diminished freedoms. If the apex court does let things linger, that may be procrastinating in a purposeful manner. ■

PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION 2022

THE NEXT BIG BATTLE

Come July 24 and President Ram Nath Kovind's tenure will come to an end. It will be time soon, therefore, to choose his successor. According to convention, the election for the office of the President of India is notified in mid-June and polling begins in July. Sixty-six Rajya Sabha members will retire by mid-July and be replaced by new members elected in polls to be held through the year, including 13 who'll be elected on March 31 and get to participate in the presidential poll.

The BJP's four-state win in the recent assembly polls in five states has put the party on a firm wicket for the presidential elections with a collective vote value of 465,797. Add to that the vote value of its NDA partners: 71,329. As the electoral college has a total of 1,098,903 votes, the BJP needs 549,452 votes to get the President of its choice elected. With the Jammu and Kashmir assembly suspended, the absence of its 87 seats with a vote value of 6,264 brings down the majority mark by 3,132, but the BJP is still short by 9,194 votes. The party, therefore, needs a new ally to sail through, possibly the Naveen Patnaik-led Biju Janata Dal or the Y.S. Jagan Mohan Reddy-led YSRCP.

For the BJP, the presidential election is an opportunity to send a strong message ahead of the 2024 general election. Last time, the party and its ideological fountainhead the RSS, had managed to send Kovind, a Dalit, to the Rashtrapati Bhawan. This time, they want someone from an underprivileged or geographically under-represented community to be elected to the top job. Several names have been doing the rounds, but no candidate has been confirmed yet. ■

–Anilesh S. Mahajan

BJP'S ARITHMETIC TO WIN PRESIDENCY

TOTAL ELECTORAL COLLEGE VOTES : **1,098,903**
VOTES NEEDED BY THE BJP TO WIN : **546,320***
VOTES THE BJP HAS CURRENTLY : **537,126**
BALANCE NEEDED TO CLINCH IT : **9,194**

RAJYA SABHA

● BJP	● ALLIES
68,676	**12,036**

The 233-member house has 708 votes for each member; the BJP has 97 members in the upper house, along with its allies' 17. It is expected to win 28 seats with no gains.

LOK SABHA

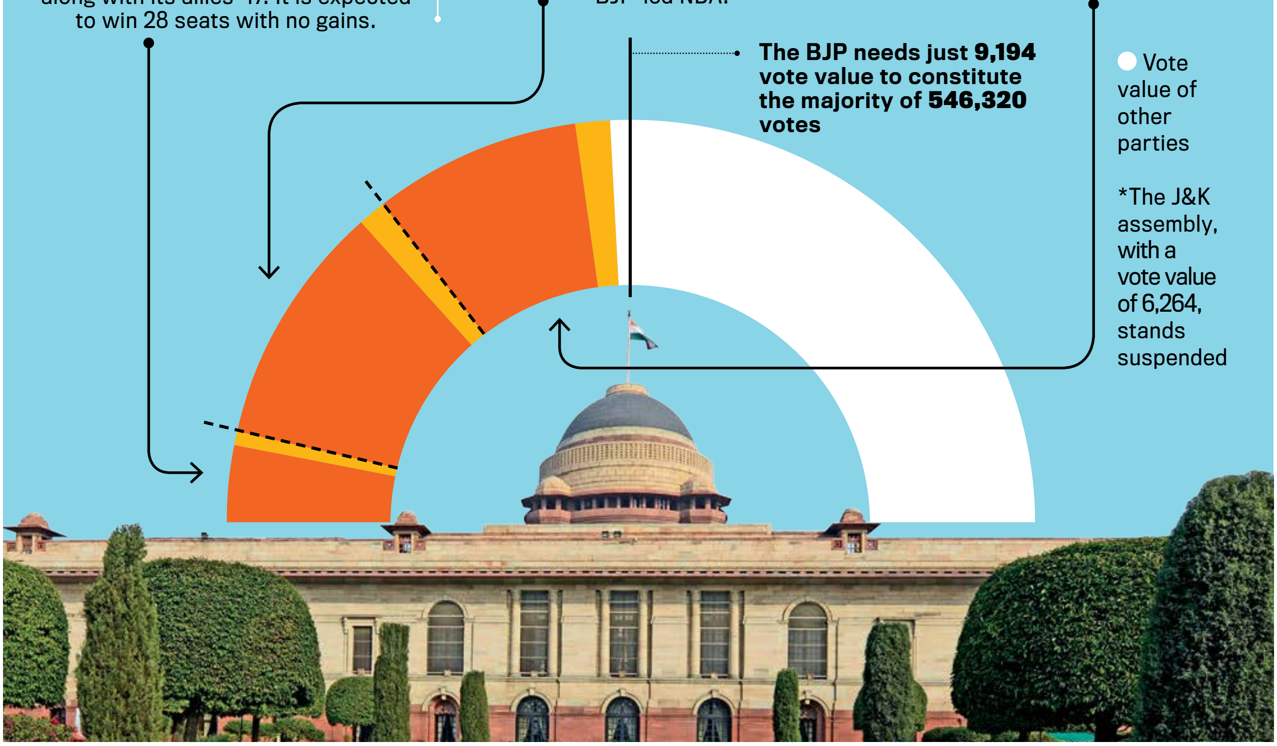
● BJP	● ALLIES
213,108	**25,488**

The 543-member hall has 708 votes for every member. Of the total members, 337 are from the BJP-led NDA.

ASSEMBLIES

● BJP	● ALLIES
184,013	**33,805**

The BJP has 1,376 MLAs in assemblies across the country, out of a possible 4,120



The BJP needs just 9,194 vote value to constitute the majority of 546,320 votes

○ Vote value of other parties

*The J&K assembly, with a vote value of 6,264, stands suspended

RAJWANT RAWAT

Graphic by TANMOY CHAKRABORTY

UTTAR PRADESH

The Mayawati Mystery

By Prashant Srivastava and Ashish Misra

Has anyone seen Behenji? One of the abiding mysteries of the 2022 assembly election in Uttar Pradesh was the absence of the Bahujan Samaj Party supremo in what was her party's most dismal performance to date. Umashankar Singh won the sole seat for the party, in Rasra, Ballia district. Even the Congress did one seat better, as did smaller parties like the Apna Dal (S), Rashtriya Lok Dal, Nishad Party and Suheldev Bharatiya Samaj Party. The BSP's vote share was its lowest since 1993, a mere 12.9 per cent. It's hard to believe that this is the same party which formed a government with a full majority just 15 years back, in 2007.

Nowhere was this decline more manifest than in its erstwhile stronghold Ambedkar Nagar, which Mayawati carved out of Faizabad district in 1995. The party lost all five seats here, for the first time ever. Two of its MLAs—Ram Achal Rajbhar from Akbarpur and Lalji Verma from Katehri—as well as ex-MP Rakesh Pandey, father of current Jalalpur MP Ritesh Pandey, had left for the Samajwadi Party on the eve of the 2022 assembly election. Ritesh, a former MLA from Jalalpur, won the 2019 Lok Sabha poll, and in the ensuing bypoll, BSP lost the seat to SP. Verma, a former leader of the BSP Legislature Party, minces no words. "Mayawati has shunned the ideals of BSP founder Kanshi Ram," he says. "She is now indirectly helping the BJP. It made the people of Ambedkar Nagar angry." Now, it seems, they have spoken.

Indeed, Mayawati's inaction has left everyone confounded. Once known for her expansive voter outreach, the BSP chief did a mere 20 rallies this election season, compared to the 200-odd rallies by the BJP's Yogi Adityanath and Congress's UP in-charge Priyanka Gandhi-Vadra, and the 100-odd of SP chief Akhilesh Yadav. According to Ajay Kumar, a Dalit activist and assistant professor in the sociology department at Babasaheb Bhimrao Ambedkar University in Lucknow, "After the BSP's ouster from power in 2012, Mayawati became increasingly sluggish. She did not show any interest in retaining the support of her leaders or the BSP voters."

Consequently, both deserted her. Of the 18 members BSP had in the assembly (after Ritesh Pandey became MP) from the 2017 election, Mayawati was left with just three MLAs just before the 2022 election. Not just sitting MLAs but even former MPs and MLAs have joined the SP in the past few years.

Hakim Lal Bind, the SP MLA from Handia in Prayagraj, who was earlier with the BSP, has this to say about Behenji's MLAs switching sides: "BSP zonal coordinators, who hold important posts in the party, asked us MLAs to make unreasonable donations to the party fund." Party tickets were allegedly contingent on such donations.

Mayawati is also accused of promoting family members—chiefly brother Anand and his son Aakash—as well as confidant and BSP general secretary and the party's Brahmin face, Satish Chandra Mishra, and his family.

Even in terms of election strategy, Mayawati's attempt to reel in the Brahmin, Muslim and Dalit votes—a

FADING PINK
Mayawati at a public gathering in Ghaziabad in UP, Feb. 3

CHANDRADEEP KUMAR

piece of social engineering that yielded a rich haul for the BSP in 2007—collapsed. After the infamous Vikas Dubey encounter in Kanpur in 2020, Mayawati had entrusted the responsibility of wooing the Brahmin community to Mishra. At the 65-odd *prabuddh sammelans* (intellectual gatherings) that he organised, Mishra would claim that if the 13 per cent Brahmins joined the BSP, then along with the 20-21 per cent Dalits, BSP's victory was assured. Riding this optimism, the party gave tickets to 65 Brahmins, of which more than half could not even save their deposits. Baidyanath Tiwari, who runs an organisation called Brahman Jago Manch in Varanasi, says, “Mayawati's politics is based only on calculation. She considers Brahmins as just a votebank. She gave Satish Mishra the responsibility of wooing the Brahmins just before the election. The Brahmins have now wised up to her tricks.”

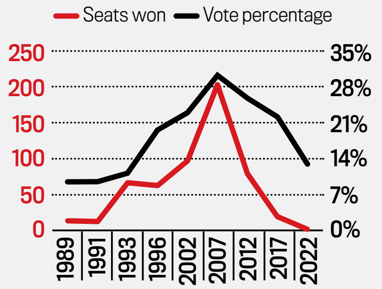
The Muslims, too, chose to repose their faith in the SP, amid allegations that Mayawati had cut a deal with the BJP in a bid to deflect the disproportionate assets cases against her and brother Anand Kumar. In 2019, the income tax department had attached a ‘benami’ property in Noida which was allegedly in Anand and his wife's names. The SP and BSP, who had fought the 2019 LS election together, had a bitter parting after the loss, with Mayawati accusing Akhilesh's party of weighing down the BSP's prospects. This time, the BSP fielded the maximum number of Muslim candidates—89—in the hope of cutting into the SP's Muslim vote.

As a BSP zonal coordinator explains, “The party's strategy was that in seats where the SP did not have a Muslim candidate, the Muslim voter would vote for the BSP's Muslim candidate.” As it turned out, BSP's Muslim candidates found themselves pitted against fellow Muslims from the SP or allies in 48 seats. In 37 seats, Muslim voters unilaterally voted for the SP; the vote was split in another 11, to the BJP's advantage. Former BSP heavyweight who is now in Congress, Naseemuddin Siddiqui, says: “Mayawati gave tickets to Muslim candidates in such a way that they could help the BJP candidates win by dividing the votes.” Mayawati herself said that Muslims had made a costly mistake by going with the SP. “Had the Muslim vote merged with that of the Dalits, we could have done in UP what the TMC did in West Bengal. But the Muslim shift to SP bred fear among BSP supporters, upper-caste Hindus and OBCs of a return to *jungle raj* if the SP came to power,” she said after the result.

It was the shift in her traditional Dalit votebank, however, that cost Mayawati the dearest. To dent her Jatav Dalit vote, the BJP fielded Baby Rani Maurya, the former governor of Uttarakhand, from Agra, an erstwhile BSP stronghold. Alongside, Asim Arun, the former Jatav police commissioner of Kanpur, was made the BJP candidate from the Kannauj (reserved) assembly seat (he won). Says Ajay Kumar, “A large section of the pro-BSP Jatav voters supported the BJP this time. The BSP, which won two reserved seats in 2017, did not win a single one in 2022.”

INTO THE TROUGH

The BSP's assembly poll performance till date



Exit polls had predicted the trend. Dalits constitute 21 per cent of the population in UP. The India Today-Axis My India exit poll reflected an increase of 10 percentage points in the Jatav vote for the BJP this time. The non-Jatav vote, too, drifted saffronwards—51 per cent of the non-Jatav Dalits likely voted for the BJP. In 2017, the corresponding number was 31 per cent, according to a CSDS (Centre for the Study of Developing Societies) estimate. The 20 percentage point increase in support resulted in an almost 2 percentage point growth in the BJP's vote share. According to Lokniti-CSDS, 65 per cent of Jatavs still voted for the BSP, but only 27 per cent of non-Jatav Dalits did in 2022.

Where does the decline of the BSP leave the Bahujan Movement? Old-timers are worried about the BSP's rout and the future of the movement. Raj Bahadur, a founding member of the BSP who is no longer with the party, says, “Mayawati has ruined Kanshi Ram's mission. I left the BSP years ago after seeing her working for her own benefit. I formed a smaller outfit for the Bahujan Movement and am working to shape it as an alternative to the BSP.”

Bhim Army's Chandra Shekhar Azad seemed to be the new face of the Dalit leadership for awhile, but the party's dismal showing— it could not even secure 1 per cent of the vote—has put paid to that hope for the time being. Azad himself lost his deposit in Gorakhpur where he contested against Yogi Adityanath.

The BSP, therefore, could again become a fulcrum of Dalit hope. “It's time we revamped the party,” says a senior party functionary. “But first, we need to remove the impression that we are a B-team of the BJP.” Prof. Badri Narayan of the Govind Ballabh Pant Social Science Institute in Prayagraj too underlines the need for the BSP to reinvent itself. “Politics,” he says, “is a game of language and reinvention. *Naye zamaane ke hisaab se khud ko dhaalna hoga* (You will have to move with the times).” He also believes the party needs to prepare a second line of leadership without falling prey to dynastic succession. “If they can do these two things,” he says, “there is some chance of them getting back in the game.” It is imperative, not just for the party, but also for the future of the Dalit movement. ■

नल जल प्रदाय योजना
संचालन
एवं संधारण कीट

LADIES' DAY CM Chouhan and BJP president Nadda with SHG members in Dewas

MADHYA PRADESH

WOOING WOMEN

By Rahul Noronha

First in Bihar and now in Uttar Pradesh, Prime Minister Narendra Modi cannot stop thanking those he calls the 'silent voters', namely the women in the electorate, who have been the direct beneficiaries of several central government schemes and have expressed their gratitude with their vote for the BJP. Increasingly aware of the importance of this demographic, the BJP is now openly wooing it. And what better way to consolidate the female vote than to fortify the state-sponsored self-help groups (SHGs), which have played a seminal role in empowering women in the countryside?

And so it was that BJP president J.P. Nadda found himself addressing a sea of women in red, blue and pink saris this International Women's Day on March 8 in Dewas in Madhya Pradesh. Making full use of the occasion, Nadda reiterated the Centre's pro-women schemes and lauded the MP government's implementation of these programmes.

MP's brigade of 'Didis' (so rechristened after Chief Minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan insisted that the earlier term 'bai' was demeaning) or women SHGs are a captive audience for the BJP. India has about 7.4 million SHGs, which bring together some 80 million women. MP has in recent years seen a huge jump in the number of all-women SHGs in its rural areas, from almost none in 2012 to about 357,499 today, spread across 45,527 of the state's 51,527 villages. Their members represent roughly 4 million of the state's families, which means they directly and indirectly impact about 20 million of the state's 87 million-strong population (assuming an average of five members per family). And hence the BJP's outreach.

"SHG functions are organised by the government," says Sachin Jain of Vikas Samvad, a social organisation working in MP, "but the guests are always BJP functionaries. Once a link between the functionary and government support to the SHG is established, the functionary has a greater 'acceptability' among beneficiaries. It is all very well thought out." And nothing translates better into votes than direct cash transfers. "Directly putting money into the hands of beneficiaries influences voting much more than making a road or digging a well," says Jain. "Financial independence also finally puts women in decision-making roles."

Political analyst Girija Shankar too is convinced that the BJP is betting on this model for the election in the state in 2023. "There is a belief within the BJP that its *laabharthi* (beneficiary-driven) approach has yielded rich dividends," he says. "The UP election, in which ration distribution was used to seek votes, has reinforced this belief." He does say for these schemes to turn into political profit, a lot depends on the efficient delivery of their benefits, the onus of which will lie with the Chouhan government.

To put more money directly into the hands of beneficiaries, the state government is handing over the implementation of some big-ticket public projects to SHGs. For example, the state's nutrition programme—allocated Rs 800 crore a year and managed by the state's women and child development department—is slowly being handed over to SHGs. They are also being permitted to operate in income-generating sectors such as wheat procurement and operation of ration shops. "Six plants to make take-home rations, each with 2,500 tonne capacity, have already been [given to] SHGs. The focus is now on building up their entrepreneurial capacity, since they are making a diverse product range but need marketing support," says L.M. Belwal, CEO of the MP Rural Livelihood Mission.

The state also claims it is strengthening SHGs by improving their access to credit, with Rs 2,900 crore worth of loans disbursed to about 320,000 groups. Funds to these groups have been allocated in other ways too, such as a Rs 286 crore 'revolving fund' for some 229,000 SHGs and Rs 834.42 crore as community investment to benefit about 106,000 groups. The state's current budget too saw a hike in allocation to SHGs, from Rs 600 crore to Rs 1,100 crore. Question is: will all the investment pay off in 2023? ■

MP HAS 357,499 ALL-WOMEN RURAL SHGs, SPREAD ACROSS 45,527 OF ITS 51,527 VILLAGES

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MVA VS BJP

THE WAR GETS NASTY

By Kiran D. Tare

GLOVES ARE OFF
NCP's Nawab Malik at the ED office after his arrest, Feb. 23

ANI

On March 13, Mumbai Police officers reached the Malabar Hill home of leader of the opposition Devendra Fadnavis to question him on the data leak case that had rocked Maharashtra in 2021. The case pertains to confidential data on the postings of senior police officers, allegedly obtained by the state intelligence department by tapping the phone calls of politicians and power brokers. This is the first inquiry the ruling Maharashtra Vikas Aghadi (MVA) alliance government government has initiated against the BJP leader and former chief minister, and is reportedly retaliation against central agencies like the Enforcement Directorate (ED) conducting raids on ministers of the ruling alliance.

The police reaching Fadnavis's doorstep was a reaction to a CBI (Central Bureau of Investigation) inquiry conducted on Sanjay Pandey, the new Mumbai police commissioner, who just took charge of the coveted post on February 28. In a six-hour interrogation, the CBI sleuths reportedly wanted to know why Pandey asked his predecessor Param Bir Singh to withdraw a letter written to chief minister Uddhav Thackeray in March 2020 complaining that then home minister Anil Deshmukh had asked his men to collect Rs 100 crore from the bars and restaurants in Mumbai.

Embroiling Fadnavis and Pandey in investigations is the next level of the ongoing tussle between the state government and the Centre. With central agencies like the Enforcement Directorate (ED) conducting raids on 10 MVA leaders, the state has decided that retaliation is warranted. Fadnavis now alleges that the government is treating him like an accused whereas he is a whistle-blower in the case. "I didn't leak any confidential data. Whatever evidence I had I have submitted to the Union home ministry as they are the patrons of the IPS officers," he says.

The case pertains to two FIRs (first information reports) filed in Pune and Mumbai on March 2 against Rashmi Shukla, currently a joint commandant with the CRPF (Central Reserve Police Force). She is accused of illegally tapping the phone calls of several politicians, including state Congress president Nana Patole, when she was heading the state intelligence department in 2019. Interestingly, it was Fadnavis who first talked about the tapped phone conversations in March 2021. He submitted some 6 GB data in a hard disk to the Union home ministry, alleging that the MVA's leaders were involved in a police postings racket. This was based on a report Shukla had submitted to the state home department in July 2020. Fadnavis says he did not give details of the tapped phone conversations to the media. "If you remember, it was Nawab Malik who leaked the conversation to the media," he claims.

THE MVA ALLIANCE IN MAHARASHTRA IS FURIOUS. THEY BELIEVE THE BJP IS USING THE CENTRAL AGENCIES UNFAIRLY TO TARGET THEIR SENIOR LEADERS

Nawab Malik, the minister for minority welfare, is in judicial custody at present in a money laundering case. On February 23, the ED arrested Malik, the main accused in a 2005 land deal where he allegedly bought a three-acre plot in Mumbai's Kurla for Rs 75 lakh (market price: Rs 300 crore) from two aides of Haseena Parkar, the late sister of fugitive gangster Dawood Ibrahim. Malik's company, Solaris Investment Private Ltd, allegedly bought the land from Salim Patel, Parkar's bodyguard and driver, and Sardar Shahvali Khan, a convict in the 1993 Mumbai serial bomb blasts case.

The ED's remand application stated that Malik paid Rs 55 lakh in cash to

ED ON THE HUNT

The Enforcement Directorate is investigating 10 leaders of the ruling MVA alliance

AJIT PAWAR, Finance minister (NCP)
CHARGE: Bought Jarandeshwar Co-op Sugar Mill for Rs 65.75 lakh, lower than the market price in 2010. Pawar says, "Let ED investigate, I was cleared of all charges"

NAWAB MALIK, Minorities welfare minister (NCP)
CHARGE: Bought a three-acre plot in Mumbai for Rs 75 lakh, lower than its actual price, from an aide of Haseena Parkar, sister of gangster Dawood Ibrahim

ANIL DESHMUKH, Ex-home minister (NCP)
CHARGE: Allegedly sent Rs 4.7 crore in extortion money to family-controlled trust, Sai Shikshan Sanstha

ANIL PARAB, Transport minister (SS)
CHARGE: Illegally constructed a palatial resort on farmland in hometown Ratnagiri

PRAJAKT TANPURE, MoS, Urban development (NCP)
CHARGE: Purchased Ram Ganesh Gadkari Cooperative Sugar factory in Nagpur at a price much lower than the actual

HASSAN MUSHRIF, Rural development minister (NCP)
CHARGE: Allegedly involved in a Rs 100 crore corruption case involving the Appasaheb Nalawade sugar factory, Kolhapur. Mushrif says he is only "helping the factory as the local legislator"

SANJAY RAUT, Party spokesperson (SS)
CHARGE: Allegedly got an interest-free loan of Rs 50 lakh for wife Varsha from Pravin Raut, an accused in the PMC Bank scam

BHAVNA GAWLI, MP (SS)
CHARGE: Converted a trust with assets of Rs 69 crore into an NGO under her control in Washim, her constituency. She says, "I myself am a complainant in the case"

ANAND ADSUL, Ex-MP (SS)
CHARGE: Allegedly involved in a fraud of Rs 980 crore in City Cooperative Bank, Amravati

PRATAP SARNAIK, MLA (SS)
CHARGE: Allegedly involved in a scam involving the National Spot Exchange Ltd

Patel which Dawood used to foment terror activities in India between 2005 and 2012. But on March 3, the agency amended its stand, saying there was a typographical error in the chargesheet—the amount paid to Patel was Rs 5 lakh. The ED's claim that Malik has links to Dawood has left the MVA furious. NCP chief Sharad Pawar also launched a broadside against the BJP-led Union government, saying the ED was being misused for political gains. "If a person is Muslim, it is very convenient to link him to Dawood," Pawar said, defending Malik.

The ED's action is a follow-up of an FIR filed by another central agency, the National Investigation Agency (NIA), this January against Dawood and his close aides under the stringent Unlawful Activities Prevention Act (UAPA). The ED has searched 10 premises in Mumbai connected with Iqbal Kaskar (Dawood's brother) and Salim 'Fruit' Qureshi (brother-in-law of Chhota Shakeel, Dawood's right-hand man). The agency has also registered a money-laundering case against the late Haseena Parkar, Dawood and his accomplices like Iqbal Mirchi, Chhota Shakeel and Javed Chikna. It says it has evidence of several alleged hawala transactions linked to ill-gotten money from extortion, drug trafficking and sale of real estate in the Nagpada and Bhendi Bazar areas of Mumbai.

Sensing the political repercussions of the allegations against Malik, the MVA is also out for blood. And their target is Fadnavis. The appointment of Sanjay Pandey is a prelude to this, say sources. Pandey has a clean track record so no one can point fingers but, more importantly, he was at the helm of an inquiry against three senior officers—Rashmi Shukla, Param Bir Singh and ADGP Deven Bharti—all favoured officers of Fadnavis. In his capacity as interim DGP, Pandey had also recommended that the state suspend Param Bir Singh for violating service rules after he did not report to work for 289 days without intimation. Two years ago, Pandey had submitted a report to the state government, holding Deven Bharti responsible for aiding Dawood's activities in Mumbai.

Chief Minister Uddhav Thackeray has alleged that the Union government is trying to browbeat the states. "Don't the central agencies have any work to do, outside of Maharashtra and West Bengal?" he asked sarcastically at a function organised by a Marathi newspaper on February 26. Fadnavis, meanwhile, is waiting for his moment. He presented several video tapes in the Legislative Assembly on March 8 alleging that the MVA had conspired to trap him and other BJP leaders in false cases. More fireworks are expected soon. ■

WEST BENGAL

When Populism Begins to Pinch

By Romita Datta

On February 8, two days before the first phase of polling in Uttar Pradesh, West Bengal chief minister Mamata Banerjee advised Samajwadi Party (SP) chief Akhilesh Yadav to add a monthly income incentive for women in his manifesto, on the lines of the Lakshmir Bhandar scheme in her own state. Akhilesh saw merit in the move, likely aware of how the dole spree in Bengal has earned Mamata and her Trinamool Congress (TMC) a committed following among women.

Women account for nearly half of Bengal's 100 million people, and of those who turned up to vote in the assembly election last year, 50 per cent chose the TMC—13 percentage points higher than the BJP. Mamata had won their hearts with carefully crafted schemes, such as Lakshmir Bhandar, Swasthya Sathi health insurance cards (issued in the name of the family matriarch) and grants for higher education and marriage of adult girls. The TMC manifesto also promised loans up to Rs 10 lakh for students at 4 per cent interest with a 15-year moratorium.

Lakshmir Bhandar, launched in 2021, offers eligible beneficiaries a monthly assistance of Rs 500 (general category) to Rs 1,000 (Scheduled Castes/ Tribes). The scheme's popularity has been evident from the serpentine queues of women who, despite the pandemic, gathered at the designated centres to sign up. Some 16 million women have registered for the scheme. The dole will cost the state exchequer Rs 16,000 crore every year. But that hasn't discouraged Mamata, who is quick to point out that women had to break into their domestic savings to tide over the financial crisis in the aftermath of demonetisation in 2016.

When Mamata came to power for a third consecutive term in May last year, one of her priorities was channelling funds to Lakshmir Bhandar. She also wanted Swasthya Sathi to cover the entire population in the state. It raised eyebrows given Bengal's precarious financial health. The revenue deficit for 2021-22 is estimated at about Rs 26,755 crore—about 1.8 per cent of the GSDP (gross state domestic product).

The crisis had begun to hurt Mamata's social outreach, with camps of ambitious programmes like Duare Sarkar (government welfare at people's doorstep) being deferred till August 2021. Lakshmir Bhandar payments started trickling into bank accounts as late as November even as many complained of not getting any money.

The cash-strapped Mamata government has had to rely heavily on market borrowings—totalling to Rs 52,000 crore between April and December 2021. It was Rs 17,000 crore more than borrowings during the corresponding period the previous year. West Bengal already spends Rs 20,000 crore a year on social welfare schemes, but Mamata is eager to widen their ambit. She wants Lakshmir Bhandar to be extended to 4 million more women and additional beneficiaries under the old-age and widow pension schemes. "Some of the Mamata government's programmes have done well and she is

HIT BY A CASH CRUNCH, THE MAMATA GOVERNMENT HAS BEEN RELYING HEAVILY ON MARKET BORROWINGS

SERIAL LAUNCH Mamata Banerjee unveils the Duare Ration scheme, Nov. 2021

ANI

THE DOLE CALL

Welfare schemes in focus in Mamata's third term

LAKSHMIR BHANDAR
Monthly income support for women
Annual outlay:
Rs 16,000 crore
Beneficiaries:
16 million

SWASTHYA SATHI
Free health insurance of up to Rs 5 lakh a year
Annual outlay:
Rs 2,000 crore
Beneficiaries:
75 million

KHADYA SATHI
Subsidised ration for all
Annual outlay:
Rs 5,000 crore
Beneficiaries:
90 million

KRISHAK BANDHU & KISAN CREDIT CARD
Crop insurance and loans for farmers
Annual outlay:
Rs 5,000 crore
Beneficiaries:
6.2 million

MATSYAJIBI CREDIT CARD
A new loan scheme for fishing communities
Annual outlay:
Yet to be announced
Beneficiaries:
600,000 (targeted)

STUDENT CREDIT CARD
Loans of up to Rs 10 lakh for higher studies
Outlay: Rs 54 crore spent so far
Beneficiaries:
14,000 so far

Source: West Bengal government

expanding her basket of doles. Populist schemes demand higher outlays over the years," says a senior West Bengal official, requesting anonymity.

Sukhendu Sekhar Ray, Rajya Sabha MP and TMC national spokesperson, counters: "India being a welfare state, social security should be a priority. Mamata Banerjee is a people's leader and the Trinamool a people's party." Ray blames the Modi government for Bengal's financial woes. "The Union government has centralised almost all financial powers. Unless 50 per cent from the central pool comes to the states, they will continue to battle financial problems," he says.

With the government struggling to generate resources, capital expenditure and departmental allocations have been slashed. Work on 10 new universities, announced in 2016, including a second campus for Calcutta University and Presidency University, has stopped. "Construction of around 800 schools and expansion of roads and bridges are on hold. The government is struggling to make the promised payments to Covid frontline workers," says a senior official.

"In the age of competitive federalism, falling capex will send wrong signals and harm the prospects of attracting industry," says Dr Nilanjan Ghosh, director, Centre for New Economic Diplomacy, Observer Research Foundation. "Already, the shadows of the Singur and Nandigram land agitations hang over the government."

Nor are all of Mamata's pet projects on track. Of the 114,000 applicants for the Student Credit Card, only 14,000 secured loans. While seven banks have joined the scheme, the West Bengal State Cooperative Bank is wary. "The government standing guarantor is not enough. The scheme itself is unviable. School students, even non-meritorious ones, passing 10th and 12th grades, are applying for loans without any career plans. We need to assess the repayment viability," says an officer of the bank. The move to expand Swasthya Sathi has also drawn flak. "Private hospitals are hesitant to admit patients with Swasthya Sathi cards as previous bills are pending with the government," says Dr Kunal Sarkar, a noted cardiologist in Kolkata. The Duare Ration scheme, with an outlay of Rs 1,200 crore, has also run into rough weather, with some 1,000 of the 21,000 ration dealers demanding more compensation for home delivery.

The state government's Rs 3.21 lakh crore budget for the 2022-23 fiscal has steered clear of any big announcements for new schemes since the state, which was supposed to generate a revenue of Rs 75,415 crore as per the 2021-22 budgetary proposal, ended up with a shortfall of Rs 1,600 crore. Allotment for just four departments—panchayat and rural development, women and child development, social welfare, and tribal welfare and agriculture—has been scaled up to Rs 56,900 crore since these are directly involved in funding popular schemes like Lakshmir Bhandar and Kanyashree, among others.

This January, Bengal borrowed an additional Rs 6,500 crore from the market. Can Mamata then afford to push ahead with her brand of popular yet profligate welfarism? Dr Ghosh warns that it's time for some pragmatism. "Schemes like Lakshmir Bhandar, which cater to specific audiences, do not qualify as social security. The government, while being populist, is not implementing the 6th Pay Commission recommendations. The pay scales of state government staff are now the second lowest in the country," he says. A little caution may not be amiss. ■

RAJASTHAN

BOVINE DEVOTION

By Rohit Parihar

PURUSHOTTAM DIWAKAR

SAY MOO CM Ashok Gehlot at Hingonia gaushala near Jaipur

It's raining funds for cow shelters in Congress-ruled Rajasthan. Chief Minister Ashok Gehlot has usurped the pet project of BJP governments, and is now spending Rs 800 crore in aid annually for *gaushalas* (cow shelters). From January on, he has liberalised the aid criteria further. The cow shelter network is expanding each year—the number of registered shelters last fiscal was 2,990 (of which 2,121 were getting aid) with 990,000 cows; now, it's 3,222 shelters with 1.06 million cows. The state is also planning 353 shelters for bulls (milch cows do not get aid, only old, and infertile cows and bulls do).

For cows, the subsidy of Rs 40 per day for a mature cow/ bull and Rs 20 for calves helps take care of half the annual expenses. A scheme was also introduced this fiscal where small, registered cow shelters with their own land can avail up to Rs 9 lakh in aid to add or improve upon basic facilities; 82 shelters have availed of the offer so far.

Gehlot also amended the Nandishala scheme for bulls this year. The new plan envisages a private *nandishala* in all 353 panchayat samitis in the next two years; the target for this year is one in all 33 districts by March 31. Each *nandishala* will get Rs 1.57 crore to set up infrastructure. E-tenders have been floated for 10 districts so far and the process for all 33 districts is expected to be completed by February.

Gehlot's love for cows is well known. During his previous term, he had set up a directorate for cows in 2013. His successor, the BJP's Vasundhara Raje, expanded on it with an exclusive department for cows. Raje introduced massive aid for private cow shelters, funded by a cess on stamp duty and sale of liquor.

But all the aid has still not been able to cushion the fallout of the ban on slaughter, which has, like in many north Indian states, killed most cattle markets of indigenous breeds in Rajasthan. Most cattle owners now breed high-yield exotic breeds and buffaloes. Unproductive cattle are abandoned as strays.

A 2019 livestock census by the Union animal husbandry ministry says the number of cows and calves in Rajasthan rose by 4.6 per cent in the 2012-19 period, rising from 13 million to 13.6 million. The number of buffaloes rose by 5.5 per cent and is now almost equal to that of cows in the state. Stray cattle are up by 34 per cent; some 700,000 roam the roads. "It is too early to judge the impact of the aid, but we have prevented at least half a million cattle from being abandoned," says Lal Singh, director, department of animal husbandry, Rajasthan.

The state is also introducing some "new interventions" to ensure that cows remain a preferred animal. This includes sex-sorted artificial insemination—which will help farmers select the sex of the calf—and embryo transfer tech to get high-quality calves. Meanwhile, the countrywide efforts to promote non-milk cow products to generate additional income continue. In November last year, Union MSME minister Narayan Rane launched an anti-bacterial fabric developed by the Kumarappa National Handmade Paper Institute in Jaipur. Earlier, Union minister for roads Nitin Gadkari had launched the state-owned institute's dung-based Khadi Prakritik Paint and said it could be a Rs 6,000 crore market.

Rajasthan officials say around a thousand shelters are sustaining themselves partly through sale of cow products. This includes income from sale of milk, vermicompost, cow urine and other products like incense sticks. Some have turned entrepreneurs too. Lalit Pathmeda, 28, from village Pathmeda in Jalore district, has set up the Godham Panch Dravya Utpad Pvt Ltd with friends. It has a 5,000 litre plant to process cow urine extract. He buys cow urine at Rs 10 a litre, the extract of which sells for Rs 160-200 a litre. With claims aplenty about its medicinal properties, the demand for cow urine shot up during the pandemic. "Aid for shelters is not a permanent solution. The government should give direct subsidy to cattle owners for unproductive cattle who can then sell its urine and dung," says Pathmeda. Officials, though, say the 'urine-dung model' may work only for cow shelters and big dairies. ■

2,121
cow shelters got **Rs 800 crore** state aid in 2021-22

34%
rise in abandoned cattle in Rajasthan (2012-19); **1.06 million** in shelters, **700,000** on the roads

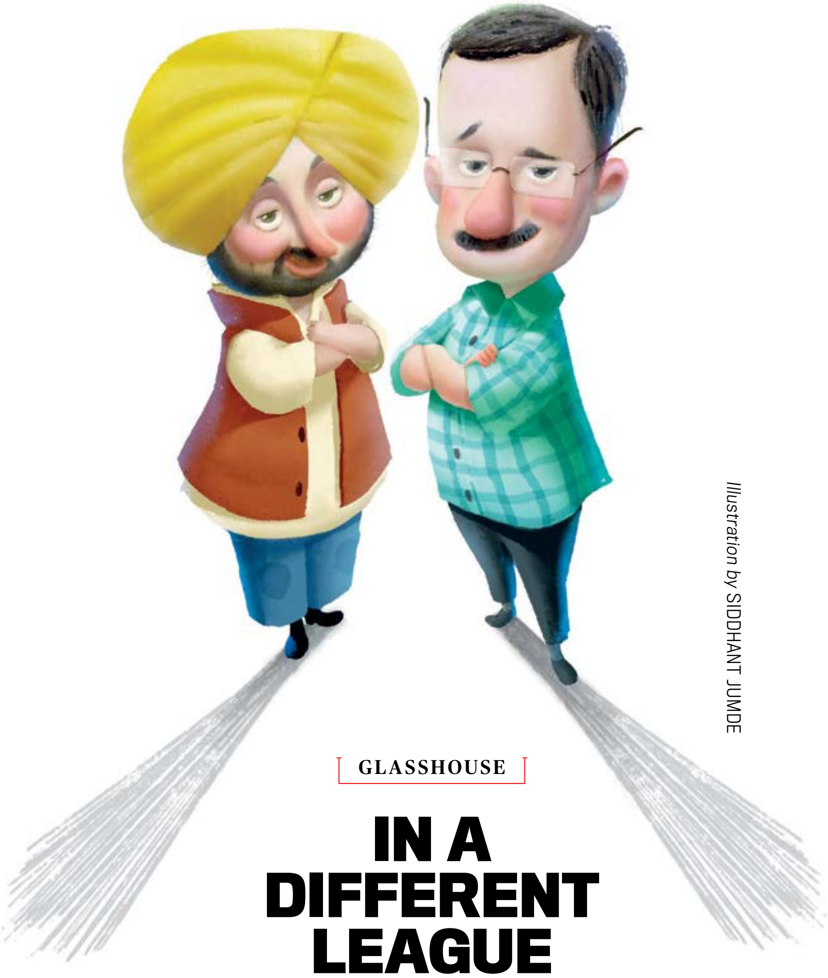


Illustration by SIDDHANT JUMDE

GLASSHOUSE

IN A DIFFERENT LEAGUE

Following AAP's massive victory in Punjab, there was speculation that the party could be the new pivot around which an Opposition alliance coalesces. The Opposition parties, though, are still to warm up to the contender. Not a single top leader among them, including Congress's Rahul and Priyanka Gandhi, state chief ministers Mamata Banerjee, M.K. Stalin and Uddhav Thackeray, NCP chief Sharad Pawar, SP's Akhilesh Yadav, posted the customary congratulatory tweet. That said, despite the political hostilities, Prime Minister Narendra Modi was quick to take to Twitter to congratulate AAP the day the election results came out.

No Upper Berths?

Before the scheduled organisational polls to elect the next Congress president, the grand ol' party faces another crisis—ensuring Rajya Sabha berths for party veterans. In April, **Anand Sharma** and A.K. Antony will retire, in June, the tenure of **Jairam Ramesh** and Vivek Tankha gets over. The list for July includes Kapil Sibal and Ambika Soni. While Antony has already announced that he will not seek re-election, the party is unlikely to field Sharma and Sibal—two members of the rebel group in the party. The fate of Soni and Ramesh is uncertain as the party doesn't have the numbers in the states. By July, the current Congress tally in the upper house, 34, will see a further decline.

ZERO MASS GAME

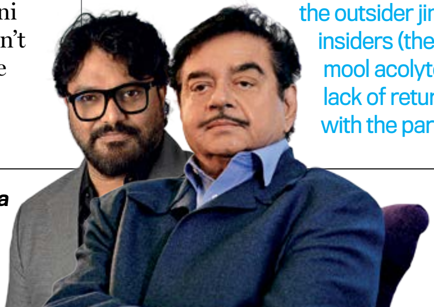
The crushing defeat of **Balbir Singh Rajewal**, the anchor of the farm union protests, shows that though the unions get the people's support on issues, they are still not seen as political alternatives. And it isn't just Rajewal who lost his deposit, 93 of the 94 candidates put up by the Sanyukt Samaj Morcha were in the same boat. Some 22 of the 32 farmers' unions that had taken part in the year-long agitation had come together to form the newly minted party. Guess it's back to the fields for the men.

The Cadre Inheritors

In a first in Madhya Pradesh, and perhaps the country, the son and daughter of the state's chief secretary and DGP are serving in the same state cadre and under the same service. Chief secretary **Iqbal Singh Bains**'s son Amanbir, a 2013 batch IAS officer, is currently collector of Betul. DGP **Sudhir Saxena**'s daughter, Sonakshi, a 2020 batch IPS officer, is a probationer at Indore. So, does having daddy as top boss make it easier, work-wise? The verdict isn't out yet.

OUTSIDER, INSIDER

The Trinamool Congress (TMC) has pitched two ex-BJP MPs, **Babul Supriyo** and **Shatrughan Sinha**, as their candidates for the Vidhan Sabha and Lok Sabha by-polls respectively. The BJP is euphoric and is already using Mamata's own "outsider" tag against both. While this sits pretty on Bihari babu Sinha, the same can't be said for Supriyo, who is a Bengali to the core. But the BJP has its own logic: both are outsiders in the sense that they are not from the TMC stable. The BJP, sources say, plans to use the outsider jingle to make the insiders (the original Trinamool acolytes) ponder the lack of returns after staying with the party for so long.



–Kaushik Deka with Romita Datta, Anilesh S. Mahajan and Rahul Noronha

GOVERNMENT JOBS

THE HUNG
THE MESS

A LACKLUSTRE ECONOMY IS DRIVING MILLIONS OF INDIANS TO SEEK SCARCE GOVERNMENT JOBS, BUT THE RECRUITMENT PROCESS REMAINS DAUNTING AND CHAOTIC

By KAUSHIK DEKA

ER,

MANEESH AGNIHOTRI

Jobs. The word rises like a dirge from all sides, painting the air in hues of what seems like a permanent lament. As an undertow of anger, it coloured the election season that just ended—even if it stopped short of becoming a catalyst for change. You hear it in slogans. You see it in the tsunami of applications against every announcement for a handful of public job vacancies. You see it signposted everywhere else on the landscape: in the lakhs of students who go abroad for basic employable education (the extent of which was brought home to us by the Ukraine exodus), in the waves of retrenchment during the pandemic, in economic migration data. In the Uttar Pradesh verdict, talk of a 'post-caste politics' again came to the fore. Specifically, voting governed by purely economic factors: joblessness was one of them. Pundits and exit pollsters spoke of it as a factor for youth in the 18-29 age group. If it was, it surely wasn't strong enough to swing the results. There was another public event just two months ago that has receded from our consciousness. On January 25, thousands of agitating job-seekers set ablaze a train coach in Bihar's Nawada. There were also violent protests in Sitamarhi, Buxar, Muzaffarpur, Chhapra, Vaishali and Gaya. One newspaper called it India's "first large-scale unemployment riots". A touch of familiar hyperbole in those words. But see it not as an event that has come and gone—rather, as a symptom of something deeper, an endemic disease that's still very much with us, and will be for the foreseeable future.

The Bihar incidents, and others less violent, alert us to that crisis by singling out a new phenomenon: a collective obsession for a government job. A paradox, at first sight. In the fourth decade of post-liberalisation India, after two generations of talk about shrinking governments and the explosion of the 'new economy', you would have expected the opposite? Well, that story has not exactly been going to script.

The Hunger

Five years ago, India's unemployment rate stood at a 45-year-high of 6.1 per cent, according to the NSSO's periodic labour force survey. What the 2017-18 data revealed to us is that we were back to the dire situation of the early seventies, the exact time when student and union unrest changed India's politics forever and tropes like the Angry Young Man got permanently embedded in our culture. It is simplistic to compare across periods with vastly different population sizes, but the conclusion is still startling: over a quarter century of reforms had paradoxically given India the same job scenario that a quarter century of socialism had, post-Independence.

We all know the potted history from there on. The economy began to decline starting from the global downturn of 2008. Over the past decade, the country faced demonetisation, GST and, finally Covid, which forced a shell-shocked private sector to cut millions of jobs. By the government's own admission, 2.3 million people lost jobs across industries—manufacturing, construction, trade, transport, education, health, hospitality, IT/ BPOs and financial services during the 2020 lockdown. According to the Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy (CMIE), unemployment touched a high of 24 per cent in May 2020, at the peak of the pandemic. It even claims there was a 46 per cent decline—from 51 million in 2016-17 to 27.3 million in 2020-21—in jobs in manufacturing, which accounts for nearly 17 per cent of India's economy. A massive setback to the Centre's original 2022 target of increasing manufacturing employment to 100 million.

The unemployment rate has since eased, hovering just above the 7 per cent range this quarter—comparable to the pre-Covid period—but the National Statistical Office released data this week that underlines the essential uncertainty of the phase we are in: in April-June '21, urban unemployment had spiked to 12.6 per

BANDEEP SINGH

UTTAR PRADESH: **Rakesh Pal**, 28, ***B.Sc. (Chemistry)***

Job applied for: Non-technical categories in railways
Total vacancies: 35,281; **Total applications:** 12.5 mn

Rakesh left his home at Jaunpur in Uttar Pradesh in 2015, a year after completing his graduation in chemistry from Veer Bahadur Singh Purvanchal University. He hoped the exposure in national capital Delhi would help him get a secure government job that would do justice to his degree in chemistry. Seven years later, he is yet to land his dream job. In 2019, he was driven by desperation to apply for the non-technical popular categories of jobs in Indian railways such as guards, clerks and timekeepers. When results were announced earlier this year, he learnt he had been placed in a level-5 job, based on his performance in what he assumed to be a screening test. "We thought the first test was a qualifying one, and that the score in the second test would determine the level of jobs that we would be selected for. That's why we protested. Even after waiting for three years, we did not get the job we wanted," says a dejected Rakesh. Meanwhile, he got enrolled at the Faculty of Law, Delhi University, and is preparing to become a lawyer.

3
MILLION

VACANT POSTS ACROSS ALL STATES, AS PER SEVERAL UNOFFICIAL ESTIMATES

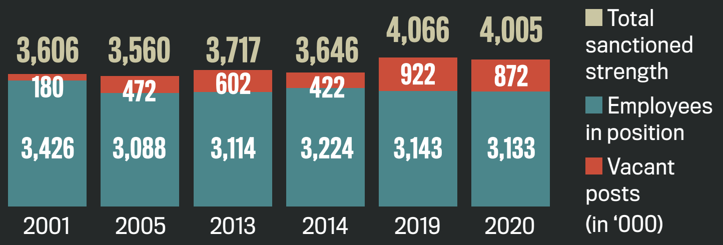
cent. That was the second wave. The depression entrenched all around us then has not entirely lifted.

There are two circles here, one contained entirely within the other. The idea of a "secure government job"—clearly making a comeback—is primarily an index of the surrounding gloom, the larger circle of distress. Take agriculture: what you hear is, again, voices of anger and distress. Farming accounts for only 14 per cent of our economy but absorbs 42 per cent of the workforce. However, that absorption capacity is clearly shrinking, as are the incomes. It's precisely from the land-holding middle castes that India saw a spate of protests demanding OBC reservations in recent times—the Jats, the Patels, the Marathas—and copycat protests from displaced beneficiaries like the Gujjars. Reservations point in only one direction: government jobs.

The question is, can the public sector cater to this new hunger? Caught in the throes of change in a transitional economy, it's hardly immune to the cycles of low growth. The CMIE estimates India had 53 million unemployed as of December 2021. Yet, the existing posts cannot absorb even 10 per cent of India's unemployed. If the Centre and states fill up all existing vacancies, only around 4

THE CENTRAL WORKFORCE

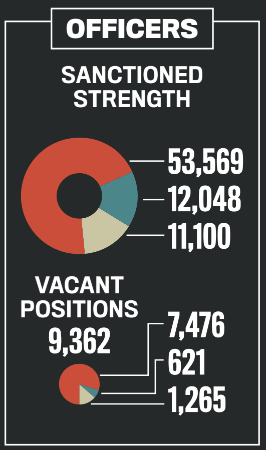
While the number of sanctioned positions has increased in the past two decades, the vacant posts have multiplied nearly eight times

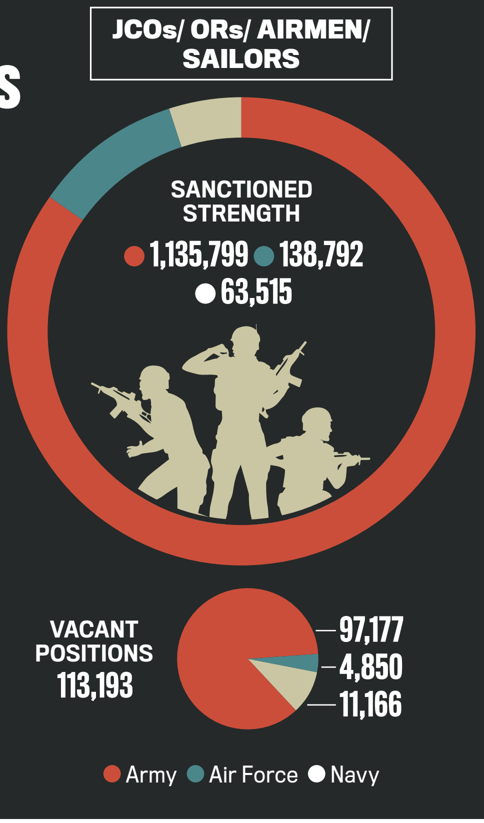


Source: Pay Research Unit, Department of Expenditure, Ministry of Finance

VACANCIES IN ARMED FORCES

122,555 or 14 per cent of the total vacancies in central government are in armed forces

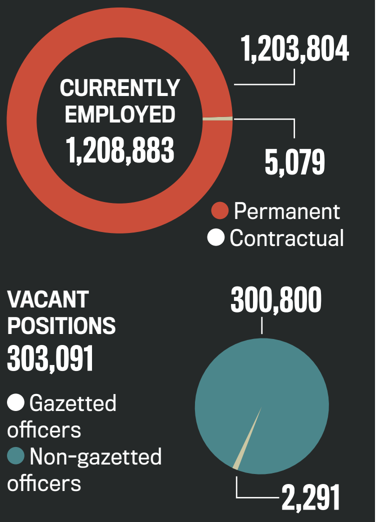




Source: Ministry of Defence, Lok Sabha, December 13, 2021

VACANCIES IN RAILWAYS

303,091 or 35 per cent of the total central government jobs are in railways



Source: Ministry of Railways, February 4, Lok Sabha

Graphics by TANMOY CHAKRABORTY

million people can be engaged. “This is assuming the number of job-seekers remain static. Every year, nearly 10 million youths are being added to the workforce. There is no way government can cater to this demand,” says Satyananda Mishra, former secretary, Department of Personnel and Training (DoPT). That’s why you see those unreal images on the ground.

The Mess

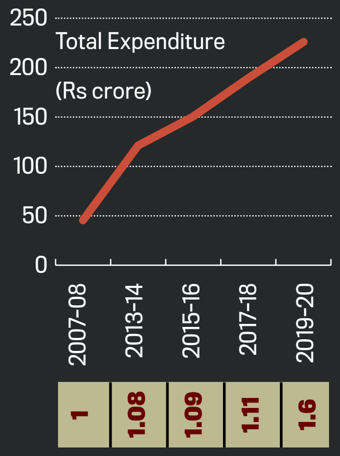
Consider this: in December 2021, the announcement of 15 openings at the Gwalior district court—for posts like peon, gardener, cleaner and driver—saw 11,000-odd applications. Required qualification for most of the jobs: Class X pass. But among those 11,000 were graduates, post-graduates, even MBAs. This is not an aberration. In 2018, some 3,700 Ph.D. holders, 50,000 graduates and 28,000 post-graduates applied for 62 openings for the post of messenger in the Uttar Pradesh police. Required minimum eligibility: Class V. You see two levels of mismatch: quantity, i.e. the sheer volumes, and quality. The youth don’t care. All they want is the job. That’s what played out in Bihar on the eve of this year’s Republic Day.

The immediate trigger? In 2019, the Indian Railways had conducted an exam for 35,281 non-technical positions. It attracted 12.5 million applications—354 applications per post. The results for the first stage were declared on January 15. The anger was about a change in the number of qualifying exams and confusion over the process to determine the minimum cut-offs. The Railway Recruitment Board (RRB) later clarified the allegations were misplaced. But from the days of the Vyapam scam, ‘due process’ has been a farce in the public eye. To begin with, the public sector has a rather limited scope to create employment. Successive regimes have exacerbated that by not filling up existing vacancies, and not doing anything to allay increasing public mistrust in the process. That’s what leads to all those signs of unprecedented desperation—Bihar’s job riots included. “It’s a reflection of the distress in the economy,” says Anupam, president, Yuva Halla Bol, a nationwide movement that seeks to mobilise youth against unemployment in an organised manner. It’s not as if political parties do not recognise the distress. Often, they utilise it as a poll plank. If Prime Minister Narendra

WHAT INDIA SPENDS ON SALARIES

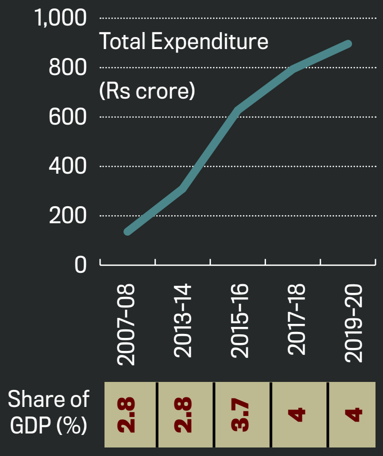
In terms of share of GDP, the expenses on salaries by the states have nearly doubled in the past 15 years, but central government expenses have remained the same

CENTRAL GOVERNMENT’S EXPENSES ON PAY AND ALLOWANCES



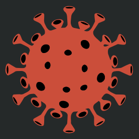
Source: Ministry of Finance; Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation

STATE GOVERNMENTS’ EXPENSES ON PAY AND ALLOWANCES

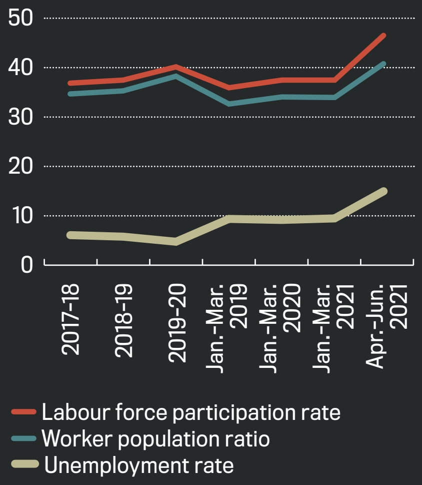


Source: State Finances: A Study of Budgets of 2021-22 by the Reserve Bank of India

THE PANDEMIC



The unemployment rate has doubled after the pandemic while the labour force participation rate–population either working or actively looking for work–has dropped. The massive cut in private sector jobs has put pressure on government sector.



Sources: Survey by Labour Bureau; Periodic Labour Force Survey; Economic Survey, 2021

KERALA: **Basheer A., 39,** ***B.Sc. (Agriculture)***

Job applied for: Forest watcher, Kottayam district

Total vacancies: 12; **Total applications:** 2,700

A. Basheer, from Poovar, a tourist village at the edge of Kerala, has been trying for a government job for 18 years. After a B.Com. degree, he has appeared multiple times in the examinations held by the Kerala Public Service Commission, the agency that handles public recruitments in the state. In 2018, he was ranked 187th in the list for the 400-odd posts for forest watchers in Kottayam district. But the PSC gave appointment advice memos to only three people in the merit list. The remaining posts were filled with temporary appointees. Basheer approached the Kerala High Court against the appointment of temporary forest watchers for the existing vacancies despite the valid merit list. The case is pending before the court.

"I was anticipating that I would get this post as around 400 vacancies were listed," says Basheer. But barring three posts, the rest were filled by temps recommended by politicians or senior officials. "We protested for 63 days, but the government ignored us. So, we moved court," says Basheer, who is also the general secretary of the Kerala PSC Rank Holders' Association. He alleges that government departments hide details of vacancies so that they can appoint temporary workers and regularise them after 10 years. Basheer, meanwhile, has been running an internet cafe to support his wife and six-year-old daughter.

"HIRING 1 LAKH PEOPLE WILL COST MY GOVERNMENT AROUND Rs 200 CRORE. I'LL HAVE TO REDUCE CAPITAL AND REVENUE EXPENDITURE, THOUGH THE ADDED MANPOWER WILL BENEFIT THE STATE IN THE LONG RUN"

HIMANTA BISWA SARMA
Chief Minister, Assam

Modi had promised 20 million jobs every year in 2014, West Bengal chief minister Mamata Banerjee spoke of 15 million new jobs in 2021. Budget 2022 chose a humbler target: six million over the next five years. That there's never any reliable data to verify the fulfilment of such promises does not deter parties—indeed, it perhaps encourages them. "During its UP campaign, the Congress promised a timeline of six months for all recruitments. Have they been able to do it in Rajasthan and Chhattisgarh?" asks Anupam. The scarcity breeds the opacity: nobody has much clarity on the numbers. The Bihar violence framed a dark irony here. Just three years ago, then Union finance minister Arun Jaitley had stated that the absence of social agitations for jobs in the preceding five years was evidence that jobs were being created.

How many jobs are there, really?

Fact is, between 2014 and 2020, exactly 398,459 new positions were added to the sanctioned strength of central government jobs. A growth rate of 11 per cent, which took the overall central workforce to just over 4 million. Sounds impressive, till you contrast it with the fact that vacancies doubled in that period—from 421,658 to 872,243. Hiring has been painfully slow: the central government has made only 444,813 hirings, half of what it could, in the past five years. Nearly 30 per cent of these happened because of a railway recruitment drive in 2019-20—the Indian Railways is the biggest central employer, accounting for 35 per cent of these jobs. But it's no exception to the general laggardly trend in hiring. In 2019, then railway minister Piyush Goyal had announced that the PSU would hire over 400,000 people by 2021. But the RRB made only 134,220 recruitments in 2019-21. The anger gets bottled up: the 12.5 million job-seekers who had applied for those 35,281 railway jobs, hundreds of whom blew their fuse in Bihar's small towns, had already waited over two years for their results.

The same reluctance to hire is visible elsewhere. The armed forces—the No. 2 central employer, with 14 per cent jobs—have 122,555 vacant posts. That includes nearly 10,000 officers' posts. (Don't even begin to think of what this implies in terms of 'efficiency'.) And a total of 41,177 posts are lying vacant in public sector banks. The Centre often blames budgetary constraints, but the numbers don't entirely support such claims. Central expenses on all pay and allowances, including for civilian and armed forces, have indeed grown by 50 per cent between 2015 and 2020, but if you compare that to its share of GDP, the rise has been minuscule—from 1.09 per cent to 1.6 per cent.

If the Centre doesn't hold...

Do the states? Central employment constitutes only around 14 per cent of India's public employment. The rest is controlled by the states—but we have no real quantification of how much 'the rest' adds up to. It's likely a highly fluctuating figure, no one keeps a real count, and whatever partial data there is happens to be well-guarded. But if we assume a ballpark figure of 28-30 million, and extrapolate the general trend towards vacancies, we can safely posit a few million possible jobs lying empty. The All-India State Government Employees Federation (AISGEF) says there are 3 million vacancies in the states and UTs. Tragically, though not unexpectedly, the states are doing no better at filling those. In FY 2021, states saw a total of 389,052 recruitments—a drop of 107,000 from the previous fiscal, and in sync with a general, gradual slide. In 2018-19, states created a total of 542,504 jobs—a little over 45,208 per month—according to the Union ministry of statistics and programme implementation. In 2019-20, that number dropped to 496,003, or 41,333 per month.

The Rajasthan government, on which the CMIE confers the dubious distinction of having the highest 'unemployment rate' (18.9 per cent) among states, claims to have made 101,164 recruitments in the past three years, but still has 200,000 more vacancies to fill up! Compare that to the four-fold rise in the number of unemployed graduates in the past four years—of Rajasthan's 6.5 million unemployed youth, 2.06 million are graduates.

What of UP? Well, state budget documents reveal 400,000 vacant posts under various departments. Yet, the results of over 20 recruitment exams—conducted by the state's Subordinate Services Selection Commission (UPSSSC), to fill up nearly 30,000 posts—have been pending for the past five years. Alleged irregularities mean most of the exam procedures are pending in court. In fact, 21 exams held in

PAWAN BHAWAR

MADHYA PRADESH

Ranjeet Raghunath, 26, *B.Sc. (Agriculture)*

Job applied for: Agri Extension Officer in MP

Total vacancies: 863; Total applications: 22,000

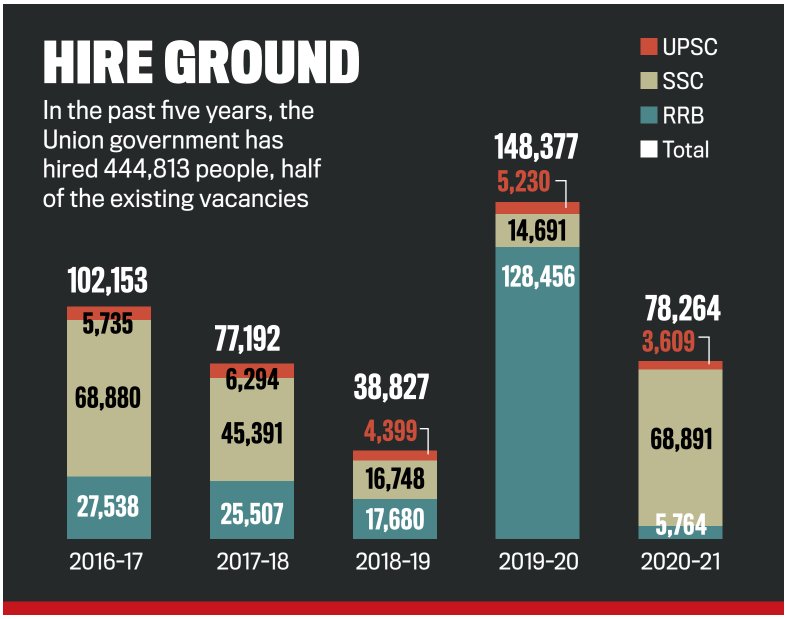
Ranjeet, a resident of Dawatha village in Madhya Pradesh's Dewas district, earned a bachelor's degree in agriculture in 2017. Ever since, he has been preparing for entrance tests for government jobs in the agriculture sector. In February 2021, he appeared for the test organised by the MP Professional Examination Board (MPPEB), more commonly known as Vyapam, for recruitment as rural agriculture extension officer, a class IV appointment under the state government. Following rumours of a paper leak and

subsequent agitation by students, the state government cancelled the examination and conducted it again in January this year. "We have lost one year of our lives due to the government's mismanagement," says a dejected Ranjeet. He has little hope of things improving or transparency in the process. If he cannot clear it this year, he will give it one more shot. "After that, I will consider doing something else," he says.

34 MILLION*

Rough total of central and state government jobs

**Centre = 4 million. Figure for states highly unconfirmed.*



HIRE GROUND

In the past five years, the Union government has hired 444,813 people, half of the existing vacancies

UP since 2013 are under the CBI radar—plunging the future of over half a million candidates into darkening shades of grey, with tragic repercussions. According to the Pratiyogi Chhatra Sangharsh Samiti, which represents the one million-strong floating contingent of students who prepare for competitive exams while being based out of Prayagraj/ Allahabad, over 50 candidates have committed suicide in the past two years. The city is headquarters to several major selection/ recruitment bodies in the state, and these often take "at least three to four years" to complete an exam process. "The age of the competing students keeps increasing and finally most of them spill out of the job race. The despair forces them to take drastic steps," says Prof. Roop Rekha Verma, former vice-chancellor of Lucknow University.

Scan the states, and you see that it's a systemic lag—ruling parties of all ideological persuasions perform the same. Mamata Banerjee's West Bengal has 200,000 vacancies, the BJP-ruled Madhya Pradesh has 100,000, and neighbouring Chhattisgarh, ruled by the Congress, has over 80,000. The BJP manifesto in 2018 had promised Madhya Pradesh 1 million jobs a year, including public and private sector. CM Shivraj Singh Chouhan recently floated a figure of 100,000 annually in the government sector alone. A rather ambitious target, considering it's higher than what the state could cumulatively achieve in the past five years—only 95,453 recruitments for class III jobs.

Social activist Akshay Hunka, who heads Berozgaar Sena ('The Army of Unemployed'), says government posts declined by three per cent between 2005 and 2020. "Governments usually don't recruit in the first two or three years of their term...they do so closer to elections. So vacancies keep getting added," he says.

Who'll do the job?

The numbers also tell a more dire story. Again, it's both a shock and not a shock to realise that most vacancies are in three departments which impact public life the most—health, education and police. The Rural Health Survey 2019-20 found that nearly 170,000 posts in the sector, including those of specialists, general practitioners, nurses, technicians and other paramedical staff, were lying vacant across India. Over 175,000 anganwadi workers and helpers, who provide basic nutrition and childcare services in rural India, are yet to be appointed.

A UNESCO report in October 2021 found that India had a shortage of over one million schoolteachers. And as per data compiled by the Bureau of Police Research & Development, there were 531,737 vacancies in police forces across India as of January 1, 2020, with UP (where 'law and order' recently became a winning election slogan) accounting for over 100,000 vacancies, highest among all states. Some states are seeking to make urgent amends. For instance, of the 100,000 recruitments Assam chief minister Himanta Biswa

MANEESH AGNIHOTRI

UTTAR PRADESH

Rahul Modalwal, 27, ***Diploma in optometry***

Job applied for: Optometrist in government hospital

Total vacancies: 46; Total applications: 525

A resident of Sirathu, a non-descript town in UP's Kaushambi district, Rahul appeared for the 10+2 board examination (science stream) in 2012 and followed it up with a two-year diploma course in optometry from a private institute in nearby Prayagraj. He found employment as an optometrist in several private hospitals, but at a miserly salary of Rs 5,000 a month. Desperate, Rahul was always on the lookout for a government job. So, when the state health department started the process of recruiting optometrists for 46 posts, Rahul wasted no time applying for it. Unfortunately, he was not selected. And the government has not recruited any optometrist since. Staring at a bleak future, Rahul shifted back to his home town and began working at his father's sweet shop. "I wasted a lot of time waiting for recruitment of optometrists in government hospitals. There is no job in the government sector, while salaries in the private sector are very low," says Rahul.

Sarma is targeting by May 10—his electoral promise last year—around 52,000 are for police, health and education. It includes creation of 5,000 additional posts in the police department. "There will be no vacancy in these three departments," he promises.

Why are governments not hiring?

Most officials are chary of coming on record, but concede that the cost-cutting imperative is driving a general trend towards contractual employment. "There has been an unofficial directive to keep departments lean," a secretary in a Union ministry tells INDIA TODAY. So, whenever a person retires, contractual employees come in, often designated as consultants. Several ministries have found this convenient, as it also allows them to bypass the regular process—with its attendant demands on time and money. The advocates of this short-cut arrangement claim this not only makes hiring easier, but also improves efficiency. "Driven by the principle of perform or perish, contractual appointments can be highly competitive and productive," says an IAS officer from Bengal. 'Productive' can have other meanings too in India: skirting the regular process often happens at the behest of politicians. Hiring of temporary workers, and their eventual regularisation, creates a route to accommodate private recommendations. Besides, all this is much cheaper. Being able to drop the perks isn't the only cost-saving feature here. Even the process of holding exams incurs huge expenses. "Recruiting 100,000 will cost my government around Rs 200 crore. I'll have to reduce capital and revenue expenditure immediately for that, though the added manpower will benefit the state in the long run," says Assam chief minister Sarma.

Government jobs have also shrunk because of technological progress, of course. For instance, the internet and smartphones have killed off letter writing—except in the realm of official communication. That has reduced the need for manpower in the postal department. Practices borrowed from the private sector have also decluttered bureaucratic functioning, reducing dependency on human intervention. Besides the efficiency curve, not much of its implication on jobs is officially stated, or tabulated—the unrealistic nature of public expectations, meanwhile, is sustained via promises. The dream of a 'government job' is alive and kicking.

Pradip Kumar Tripathi, secretary, DoPT, the nodal ministry for central jobs, says his ministry only facilitates the hiring process. "It's the prerogative of ministries to hire or not. Only they can explain why they are not hiring," he told INDIA TODAY, when asked why two DoPT reminders to ministries—on January 21, 2020, and June 3, 2021—spurred none into action. Another DoPT official claims several ministries fail to formally cite their vacancies before budgetary provisions are made. Some bureaucrats blame it on recruiting organisations—and indeed, thereby hangs another tale.

Civilian recruitments to the central government are conducted primarily by four organisations—the Union Public Service Commission (UPSC), which hires civil servants; the Staff Selection Commission (SSC), which recruits non-gazetted staff to Group 'C' (Class III) and Group 'B' posts; the RRB, which handles the railways; and the self-explanatory Institute of Banking Personnel Selection (IBPS). SSC and RRB have often been embroiled in controversies. In 2018, an alleged paper leak in an SSC exam led to a CBI probe. Curiously, between 2018 and 2020, the SSC recruited the lowest number of candidates, less than one-fourth of what it recruited in 2016-17 or in 2020-21. INDIA TODAY reached out to Ashim Khurana, then SSC chairman, but did not get any response.

RRB exams, too, have not escaped the taint of corruption. In 2010, the CBI unearthed a multi-crore railway recruitment scam and arrested eight persons, including the son of the Mumbai RRB chairman, for allegedly leaking exam papers. For experts, the recent Bihar incidents are only a symptom. "Why does it take over two years to announce these results? That speaks volumes about the government's attitude towards the massive job crisis in the country," says economist Santosh Mehrotra, former professor, Centre for Informal Sector and Labour Studies, JNU.

Barring a handful, most states don't have a singular recruiting agency. Most departments hold their own exams or outsource it to private agencies. Not surprisingly, these often get mired in allegations of malpractices and long legal battles. In February 2017, Bihar police arrested Bihar Staff Selection Commission (BSSC) chairman and senior IAS officer Sudhir Kumar as well as BSSC secretary Parmeshwar Ram for alleged involvement in a question paper leak in an exam to recruit clerks and

RAJASTHAN

Surabhi Pareek, 22, *B.Sc. (Biology), B.Ed. (Final year)*

Job applied for: Senior secondary teacher

Total vacancies: 31,000; Total applications: 1.6 million

Bikaner resident Surabhi topped the Rajasthan Eligibility Exam for Teachers (REET) Level 2 for senior secondary posts in government schools. For just 31,000 jobs, 1.6 million candidates took the test conducted by the Rajasthan Board of School Education in September 2021. Being the topper turned out to be a nightmare as she was trolled on social media for cheating and started getting abusive calls. In February, CM Ashok Gehlot cancelled the examination amid allegations that around 300 candidates had access to the leaked paper.

The cancellation has not just stymied Surabhi's hope for a government job, but also added another social pressure. "I am told that unless I make it to the top 10 again, it would mean I cheated last year," she says. Surabhi is also worried about other rank holders from poor and rural backgrounds who would have to bear the financial impact of going through the process again. Among them was a shepherd and another who had to sell off his mother's jewellery. "The media projected that a majority of the candidates wanted a re-exam. Obviously, 97 per cent who failed would want that," says Surabhi.

WEST BENGAL: Jinat Asrin, 32, *B.A. in Bangla literature*

Job applied for: Secondary/ higher secondary teacher

Total vacancies: **17,400;** **Total applications:** **300,000**

Jinat is among the droves protesting the delay in recruitment of school teachers in Bengal. The West Midnapore native, who's married to a jobless PhD holder, has been waiting to land a secondary/higher secondary teacher's job since 2016. One of 300,000 applicants for 17,400 vacancies, she never got a call, despite being on the merit list. Finally, in her second month of pregnancy, she joined the protests and suffered a miscarriage. Back at the demonstration site after having lost everything, she says: "I have nothing to fear anymore. My father is 65 and has suffered a stroke. I take tuitions to run my family." The exam to select upper primary teachers, too, is in a mess– 14,339 vacancies, 228,220 successful candidates, 28,900 interviews... and 2,032 court cases! The Calcutta High Court finally scrapped the process and asked the School Service Commission to redo things. The alleged irregularities are of an unbelievable nature. Candidates without even pass marks, and certainly not in any list, have made it to counselling. And deserving candidates like Jinat are languishing despite being empanelled.

SUBIR HALDER

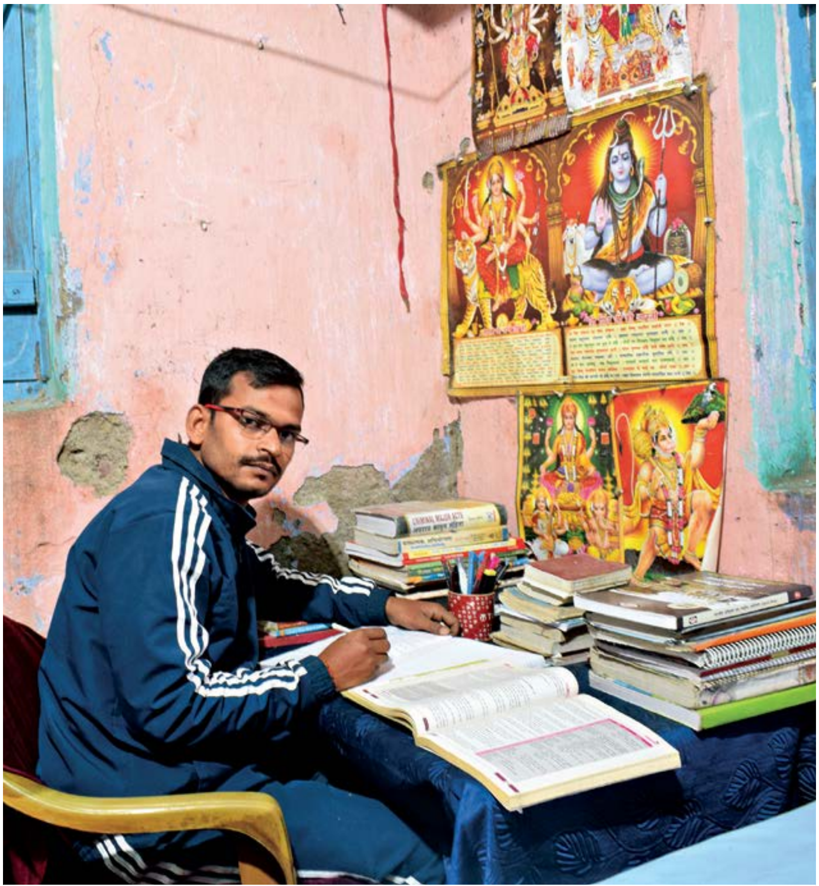
secretariat assistants.

In Rajasthan, a test to recruit schoolteachers saw a question paper leak in September 2021! One of two papers stood cancelled. So did the dreams of 1.6 million applicants competing for 15,000 posts. Similar allegations, in a 2016 exam conducted by the West Bengal School Service Commission to select Upper Primary Teachers (V to VIII), have kept the fate of 28,900 candidates hanging. "A disproportionately high number of candidates apply for a few posts. Ministries are not equipped to conduct exams of such massive scale. There's also political interference and the lure of easy money. So such incidents take place," says Kumar Sanjay Krishna, former chief secretary, Assam.

What's the way forward?

Experts concur that the government has very limited scope to enhance its recruiting potential and, therefore, has to think out of the box to do what it can. Former DoPT secretary Shantanu Consul says governments must overhaul organisational structures. "When the government gets, say, India Post to shed flab, it gives them a chance to bolster strength in education and health," he says. Mehrotra, too, says that unproductive manpower must be trimmed to create openings where it's urgently needed—education, health and police. N.K. Choudhary, former HoD, Economics, Patna University, says investment in health and education automatically creates future opportunities. Insiders say governments have indeed been innovating. For instance, Bengal recently opened up internships for honours graduates securing first class. "About 6,000 such students will be appointed as trainees and paid a stipend of Rs 5,000 a month," says a labour department secretary, requesting anonymity.

All agree on the need to streamline and clean up the whole process. "If India can organise elections on such a massive scale, why can't we do the same with exams? All exams can be concluded in a maximum of nine months," says Anupam. In August 2020, the Modi cabinet sought to address this issue by setting up a National Recruitment Agency (NRA) to conduct a common preliminary exam for central jobs: a winning candidate can apply to UPSC et al with the common eligibility test (CET) score that exam



BIHAR: Gulab Gautam, 25, *B.Sc. (Chemistry)*

Job applied for: Multi-tasking non-technical staff
Total vacancies: 20,902; **Total applications:** 3 million

He may be preparing for several competitive exams, including for the Bihar Civil Services, but Gulab has his heart set on the police sub-inspector's post. This native of Akbarpur village in Nawada district has left the comfort of home—which has electricity, internet, television, home-cooked food and plenty of open space—to park himself in a 12ft x 8ft room at a boys' hostel inhabited by a bunch of like-minded youth. Their company, he says, "helps him stay grounded and motivated".

In 2019, Gulab took the examinations for recruitment to the Bihar Police and the Staff Selection Commission examination, but could not clear either. "Government jobs are the only hope for students like us," says Gulab, whose elder brother in the army supports his studies as his farmer father is too poor to do so. Gulab cooks his own food, hasn't watched television for more than five months and does not remember the last time he visited a theatre. He does not have a personal computer, but his mobile phone helps him access the examination content.

generates, the final selection being subject to separate specialised exams. The CET score shall be valid for three years. This, the government says, will "significantly reduce" the time taken by the whole cycle. Some departments even intend to do away with any second-level test and go ahead with hiring based on CET scores and physical/ medical tests.

The NRA is to go on stream this month, according to Jitendra Singh, the Union minister of state for personnel and public grievances. Assam has also initiated a common exam model for Grade II and IV employees across departments. And CM Bhupesh Baghel says his state's initiative—the Chhattisgarh Employment Mission—aims to create 1.2-1.5 million jobs in the next five years. A lot of such promises have, of course, remained in the realm of rhetoric in the past.

That larger circle remains a vicious one. Our year-on-year demographic spurt hit its peak in the early 1990s and stabilised: all through the '80-90s, we were adding about 17-19 million annually to our absolute numbers (by contrast, we added only 13 million in the previous year). Eventually, these individuals would grow to attain working age and the economy would need the space to absorb them. Luckily, that's also the period when reforms opened up several sectors. Data suggests the uptake was just about reasonable—61 million new jobs created in two decades, between 1991 and 2012, even if 90 per cent were in the informal sector. Anecdotally, everyone can attest to a boom and an expansion in employment, self-given or otherwise—think construction, real estate, telecom, tourism, food and hospitality, IT/ BPOs, MSMEs. But the story went sour in the late 2000s. The 'demographic dividend' that India had of a young working population was to last till roughly 2030-40. Unluckily, its onset coincided with the global downturn of 2008. And that was that. The anger we see on the streets comes from being robbed of that destiny. We have to correct history's anomaly—and fast. ■

—with Ashish Misra, Amitabh Srivastava, Rahul Noronha, Romita Datta, Rohit Parihar and Jeemon Jacob

INDIA-UAE CEPA TO CREATE JOBS, BOOST TRADE: 10 POINTS

The Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement, signed by India and the United Arab Emirates, will help businesses in both nations and foster closer bilateral ties.

India and UAE held a virtual summit on Feb 18th to further cement bilateral ties and strategic partnership between nations that have worked closely amid the pandemic, helping each other tide through. Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan witnessed the signing of the Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement at the end of a "historic summit" and adopted the Joint India-UAE Vision Statement.

The Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) - a comprehensive free trade agreement between the two nations - will come into force this May and will open new doors of export to the UAE, Union Minister Piyush Goyal mentioned. While India will benefit from competitive pricing, new export opportunities, job creation and reduced duties, it will put in place a mechanism to help UAE investors fast track their investments in infrastructure in India, and in the logistics chain.

10-POINT GUIDE TO THE COMPREHENSIVE ECONOMIC PARTNERSHIP AGREEMENT:

1 The agreement will help two-way commerce reach the $100 billion mark and help create jobs in India and in the UAE, Piyush Goyal said. It will give significant benefits to Indian and UAE businesses, which includes enhanced market access and reduced tariffs.

2 The CEPA is expected to increase bilateral trade from the current $60 billion to $100 billion in the next five years.

3 The pact will generate 10 lakh jobs in labour-oriented sectors like textiles, handlooms, gems and jewellery, leather and footwear and provide an impetus to exports to the UAE market from India.

4 The UAE has agreed to eliminate duties on Indian jewellery with India promising duty concessions on gold imports up to 200 tonnes. India will help UAE ensure food security through assured supply from the country.

5 India will advantage from the low-priced raw materials from the UAE that will help support domestic industries.

6 The deal will also help boost the Indian services sector. "*Estimates are that this pact will double bilateral trade in goods, expand our trade in services, and provide over a million job opportunities for our people here*," **Piyush Goyal** was quoted as saying.

7 The pharma sector will also benefit immensely under the agreement. The UAE has agreed to automatic registration and market authorization for made-in-India medicines in case of their regulatory approval in US, EU, UK and Japan.

8 "*Petroleum products will come in a big way from the UAE. We also expect a number of intermediates to come into India which will support our downstream processing*," **Piyush Goyal** said.

9 The agreement also has a permanent safeguard mechanism to protect businesses in addition to a 40% value addition rule.

10 UAE Minister of State for Foreign Trade Thani bin Ahmed Al Zeyoudi said that the deal - covers areas including goods, services, rules of origin, customs procedures, government procurement, intellectual property rights, and e-commerce - will add $8.9 billion to his country's GDP in the next eight years and boost exports by 1.5 per cent, reported PTI.

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SUNJAY SUDHIR
AMBASSADOR OF INDIA TO UAE

REFLECTION OF THE TRUST AND CONFIDENCE

While India – UAE relations date back centuries, this decade has witnessed a paradigm shift with the signing of the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Agreement in 2017. There has been a re-invigoration of the relations, driven at the highest level through a special personal bond shared by our Prime Minister Sh Narendra Modi and Crown Prince of UAE H.H. Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan. Their vision has been to make the partnership truly comprehensive and deep.

The depth of our friendship and the fortitude and resilience of our nations has enabled India-UAE relationship to evolve and adapt to the challenges of a complex and uncertain world, particularly the Covid 19 pandemic. Our nations have stayed focused on the prosperity and progress of our peoples and the wider world. And it is this resolute focus that fueled our nations to conclude the negotiations of the India-UAE Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) at an unprecedented pace. It is the fastest free trade agreement to have been negotiated between any two countries, and took a mere 88 days, a reflection of the trust and confidence our nations place in each other.

India – UAE CEPA holds tremendous significance. It is a comprehensive economic pact between the 6th largest economy in the world and the 2nd largest economy in Middle-East. It is the first bilateral trade agreement that the UAE has signed with any country and our first trade pact in a decade. This reflects the value this relationship holds for both our countries. A natural progression for our nations after the signing of the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Agreement in 2017, CEPA provides impetus to a strong and growing relationship, placing it on a fast-paced trajectory. Along with the announcement of CEPA on 18th Feb, our leaders also shared a Joint Vision Statement of our partnership making it future-ready, with a special focus on co-operation in newer and emerging areas such as sustainability, climate action, innovation, digitalization, startups, food and energy security, health, FinTech and skilling.

Historically our economic relations have been centered more around trade in goods, but have witnessed a marked increase in bilateral investments in recent years making the UAE the largest Gulf investor into India. CEPA opens doors to countless opportunities for both trade and investment. While we expect the trade between our nations to reach USD 100 billion in the next five years, I believe the scope is much greater. The agreement is futuristic, comprehensive, and ambitious with a holistic coverage of a wide range of sectors and commitments including over hundred sub-sectors in services, IPR, government procurement, digital trade, telecom. It even looks at the regulatory aspects like rules of origin, dispute settlement, customs procedures, and others in greater depth.

CEPA will usher in a new epoch for India-UAE partnership and contribute to a sustained global recovery, at a tough – but potentially transformative – time. The mutual desire and an unwavering commitment to deliver far-reaching benefits for the peoples of both countries was the driving force behind the negotiations. Today, CEPA stands signed, sealed, and delivered. The stage is set for a new era of prosperity between UAE and India. This agreement is, simply put, a paradigm shift.

UAE : THE LAND OF OPPORTUNITY

United Arab Emirates is geographically positioned at right location to act as the hub of global trade and commerce. The proximity to other countries in Middle East, North Africa, South Aisa and South East Asia makes it the ideal place to setup headquarters of any business. The country has the largest manmade sea port at Jebel Ali and one of the busiest airports in the world at Dubai. For UAE, India is the second largest trade partner aWs per 2019 statistics. The trade relation between UAE and India is at its zenith upon the recent signing of bilateral trade agreement. Indian businesses can access investment in key areas and find new market via operating through UAE.

A UNIQUE DESTINATION FOR INVESTORS

UAE has a stable polity and efficient governance to run the country. Being one of the safest and peaceful countries in the world, UAE has become the most sought after destination for foreigners to settle down as their second home. Incorporation of Company, obtaining residence visas, opening corporate and personal bank accounts, purchasing residential property etc are the few things which investors want to do initially in the UAE. It finds place within top ten safest countries in the world to live and work. The security of country is intact due to its diplomatic strategies and vision of Rulers. There is a robust network of banks including international banks and few Indian banks. The currency Arab Emirates Dirham (AED) is stable and pegged to US Dollars. E-Governance in all government departments makes administrative work transparent and efficient.

THE LAND OF FREEZONES

Free Trade zones are designated areas within UAE with its own rules and regulations to facilitate business. Its similar to Special Economic Zones which enjoys lot of incentives in India. There are more than 40 Freezones in the UAE and each Freezone is a beehive of business activities.

Freezones in the UAE have propelled the growth of the country by attracting foreign investors to setup their base in UAE. The Government offers attractive incentives to investors in Freezones while setting up their companies. The investment and expenses of running a company can be precisely calculated and there is total transparency in the working of system. The efficiency in governance was achieved through implementing blockchain technology and paperless transactions in Government departments and Freezones. The competition among Licensing Authorities in attracting investors has led to huge reduction of costs in establishing entities in UAE, making it beneficial to global investors and start-ups. The easiest and cost effective way of settling in the UAE is to setup a freezone company and obtain visas under it.

THE LOW OR MINIMUM TAX COUNTRY

UAE is renowned as a tax haven with no Income tax being levied on personal income. However it has started collecting 5% Value Added Tax based on modus operandi of business. It has recently announced 9% Corporate tax which will be implemented from June next year. When it implements the corporate tax, it will be the country with lowest taxes on corporates. It is also pertinent to note that this tax is not applicable to Freezone companies if they don't do any local trade with mainland companies. Becoming a tax regime will add to the transparency and efficiency of business being done in the Emirates.

In brief, the future of trade & commerce between these two countries look bright and the people of both countries will be the ultimate beneficiaries.

SYAM P PRABHU
BA(Law), LL.B, LL.M, Founder & Managing Director,
AURION Business Consultants, UAE

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NEW CM, OLD PROBLEMS

CM BHAGWANT MANN AND AAP BROKE THE SHACKLES IN PUNJAB POLITICS. CAN THEY DO THE SAME FOR THE ECONOMY AND THE PEOPLE OF THE STATE?

By Anilesh S. Mahajan

Ever since the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) swept the assembly election in Punjab, social media has been flooded with videos of Chief Minister Bhagwant Mann's past satires eviscerating politicians, bureaucrats and the police. The comedian-turned-politician is a master of the art of political satire; indeed, since 2014, Mann's wit-laced oratory has created its own niche even in the Lok Sabha. But now that he is chief minister, the shoe is on the other foot. The burdens of running a government are upon him and, for once, he will be the target of satire and much more.

On March 16, Mann took oath as chief minister at the native village of freedom fighter Bhagat Singh, Khatkhat Kalan in SBS Nagar. Politically, AAP is in a dilemma over the appointment of deputy CMs, apparently the reason for the delay in cabinet formation. Mann is apparently not keen on having deputies, whereas AAP sources in Punjab say that there have been discussions to have three deputies, one each from the OBC Sikh, Dalit and upper caste Hindu communities. The Punjab cabinet can have a maximum of 17 ministers.

Mann is aware of the huge challenges ahead, commenting after the victory that his legislators would have to work "counting the days and not months or years" to stay ahead. The biggest challenge, of course, is the depleting finances of the state. The revenue receipt targets for this fiscal is Rs 95,257 crore but, for several years now, Punjab has had a bad habit of falling short by a massive 15-20 per cent. The state has already reported a cumulative debt of Rs 2.82 lakh crore, an increase of Rs 1 lakh crore in the past five years. To add to

PRABHJOT GILL

A NEW DAY CM Bhagwant Mann at his swearing-in, March 16

Mann's worries, from June onwards, the Centre is not obliged to provide GST compensation (roughly Rs 15,000 crore a year). That said, at Rs 15,109 crore, Punjab's GST collection for 2021-22 was the highest in five years.

Next in line is implementing the freebies and guarantees committed by his party in its poll campaign. The laundry list includes, among other things, 300 units of free electricity to every household, Rs 1,000 to every woman above 18 in the state, and a hike in old-age pension to Rs 2,500 per month. In addition to this, AAP has promised to set up 6,000 mohalla clinics and abolish property taxes. Punjab already provides free electricity to irrigate farms, free bus trips for women and a myriad other freebies. Unlike the AAP chief and Delhi chief minister Arvind Kejriwal, Mann does not have the luxury of a surplus budget (revenue surplus was Rs 1,271 crore for 2021-22 in the capital). A top official in the Punjab government told INDIA TODAY that there are avenues to augment the revenues of the state, "but for this, there is need to improve governance, compliances... and we need tough measures to plug pilferages".

Will Mann's lack of administrative experience be a liability, as many critics fear? "Experience is not a prerequisite," says Ranjit Singh Ghuman, professor of eminence at the Guru Nanak Dev University (GNDU) in Amritsar. "One requires political will and transparency in governance. The political leadership has to ensure that the message going down is very clear to the bureaucracy," he says. The immediate challenge for Mann, he says, is to restore the credibility of the government and bridge the trust deficit with the people. Along with this, Ghuman says, he needs to send a signal that the government means business and restore trust in the institutional frameworks that set the rules of the game. Following such cues, in his first verbal orders, Mann pulled the security cover of 122 former legislators and ministers.

TASKS AT HAND

The first challenge for Mann is ensuring the smooth procurement of wheat starting next month. The Piyush Goyal-led Union ministry of consumer affairs, food and public distribution has asked Punjab to restrict wheat procurement to 13.1 million tonnes, whereas state agencies have chalked out plans to buy 13.5 MT. State officials are lobbying hard to get the Rs 29,500 crore cash credit limit (CCL) released for this.

THE URGENT CHALLENGE FOR MANN IS RESTORING THE CREDIBILITY OF THE GOVERNMENT AND BRIDGING THE TRUST DEFICIT WITH THE PEOPLE

Mann will have to work it out with Goyal to ensure maximum procurement. The state's inefficient procurement system is also a concern—it was the last in the country to make the direct payments to farmer accounts for grains procured after the last kharif season. In fact, after the curbs imposed by Goyal's ministry, state agencies are now busy linking bank accounts with digital land records to cut down inefficiencies. The Centre procures grains worth Rs 60,000 crore in the rabi (wheat) and kharif (paddy) seasons from Punjab. A state-Centre tussle is also on over the Rural Development Fund (RDF), which brings in Rs 1,100 crore at 3 per cent of the MSP (minimum support price) of the crop. Umendra Dutt, executive director at the NGO Kheti Virasat Manch, though, says Mann's real focus must be transforming farming itself. "Punjab is battling pollution of the soil, groundwater and air. The only solution is diversifying and cultivating more organic crops," he says.

Mann has promised to ensure crop diversification, with the state buying the produce to encourage more farmers to get out of the wheat-and-paddy cycle. His political rivals, like Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD) chief Sukhbir Badal, argue that buying the produce on a cash-strained balance-sheet is not a workable option. Mann will have to find a solution, for there is a limit on his finances. Meanwhile, the industry worries that any additional cess or levies will derail their recovery just as it limps back from the effects of Covid. The disruptions caused by the recent farmers' agitation have already left private investors jittery. Mann will have to reassure them on Punjab's capabilities in maintaining law and order and ease of doing business.

The chief minister understands that jobs have to be created to check many of the social ills plaguing the state, including a drug abuse epidemic, rise of organised crime, etc. At 9 per cent, the unemployment rate is not dramatically higher than the national average (7.5 per cent), but the increasing discontent among the youth in this sensitive border state is a matter of worry.

MINING THE MONEY

So can Mann boost revenues without stressing urban occupations? Outgoing finance minister Manpreet Badal had asked the Centre to amend Article 276(2) to increase ceilings of professional tax from Rs 2,500 to Rs 12,000 per annum. Punjab already levies Rs 200 per month on all income tax payers in the state. The Kejriwal government has the same levies in Delhi, and apparently also backs relaxation in ceilings.

PRIORITY CONCERNS

- **Improving state finances is the biggest challenge. Punjab has a cumulative debt of Rs 2.82 lakh crore and rarely meets its revenue receipt targets**
- **Finding the money for the freebies and sops announced during the poll campaign**
- **Ensuring smooth rabi season wheat procurement starting April. State has set a target of 13.5 MT; Centre wants it capped at 13.1 MT**
- **Agriculture, industry in the doldrums. Getting farmers to break monoculture practices, boosting investor confidence top priority**
- **The 9% unemployment rate must be brought down to cure social ills like the drug abuse epidemic and increasing discontent among the youth**

As a former top bureaucrat explains, if the policies on liquor, sand mining, transport and cable TV are implemented transparently and compliance is strict, additional revenues can be ensured. Every party, including AAP, has criticised the implementation of these policies in the past. Other than this, the options are land development and monetisation of public sector undertakings (PSUs). "This will require political will. It is easy to pre-empt the conventional political parties, but not new outfits like AAP," says the bureaucrat.

The bureaucracy believes the Mann government will need hand-holding, but some friction with the Centre is inevitable. Issues like reclaiming control of dams (the 2021 Dam Safety Act has diluted the role of states), the Bhakra Beas Management Board dispute and transfer of the Union territory of Chandigarh to Punjab are already being prepped.

Mann's government will also be going up against the AAP government in Delhi on some issues, including construction of the Sutlej Yamuna Link canal, and dues on river water sharing and air pollution. These are in addition to the power balance he has to strike internally in AAP with Kejriwal. "He can't afford an image of a leader tutored by Delhi," says Ashutosh Kumar, who teaches political science at Panjab University.

THE PANTHIC DILEMMA

Politically, the most awkward challenge for Mann is to resolve the legal cases and controversies surrounding the alleged incidents of religious sacrilege in Faridkot in 2015. The chief of the SIT which investigated the case, Kunwar Vijay Pratap Singh, is now a party MLA from Amritsar North, which has raised the stakes for AAP. In the current assembly, it has more *panthic* (religiously observant Sikhs) representatives than any other party. This could create additional pressure on AAP to resolve many of the outstanding issues where religious sentiments run high, including the release of Sikh terrorists such as Davinder Pal Singh Bhullar, who is serving a life sentence in the 1993 Delhi bomb blasts case. In March 2014, his death sentence was commuted to life in jail. A decision to release him has to be taken by Delhi's Sentence Review Board headed by AAP minister Satyendar Jain.

Mann will have to tread cautiously on *panthic* issues, and stay alert on attempts to break the peace in the state. Pro-Khalistan groups, including Simranjit Singh Mann's Shiromani Akali Dal (Amritsar), cornered over 5 per cent of the votes this election. Apart from dealing with these outfits democratically, Mann will have to ensure that arms smuggling and violence, including targeted killings, remain under check. On March 14, England-based kabaddi player Sandeep Singh Nangal was killed near Nakodar in Punjab. There is suspicion that pro-Khalistan groups were behind the killing.

Punjab is a huge opportunity for AAP in its dream of becoming the natural opposition to the BJP nationally. It can't afford any slip-ups now. ■

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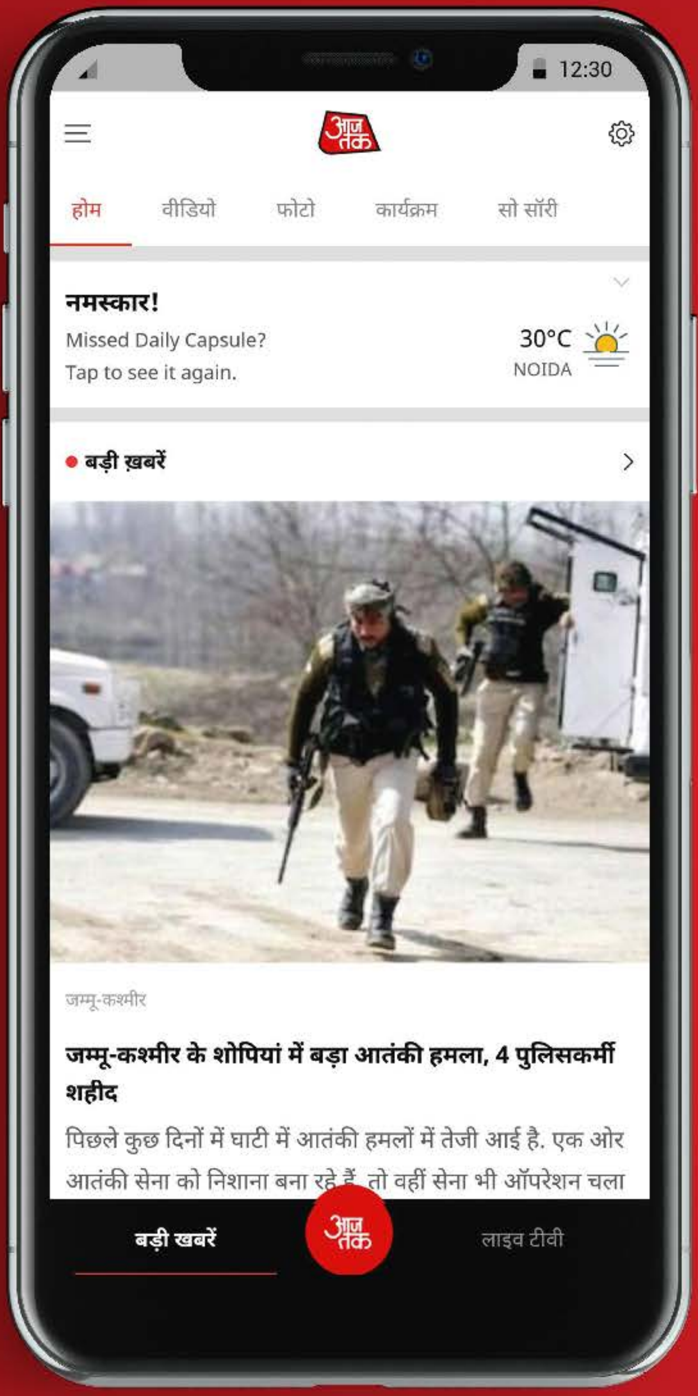
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THE LADY AND THE YOGI

WHO IS THE MYSTERY MAN WHO GAMED THE BOURSES AND MADE THE NSE DIRECTOR HIS WILLING PROXY?

By Shwweta Punj

The arrest of Chitra Ramkrishna, former MD and CEO of the National Stock Exchange (NSE), on March 6 by the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) in the 'Himalayan yogi' and 'co-location' scams has turned the spotlight yet again on the fall from grace of the 'queen of the bourse'. That's how *Forbes India* had described Ramkrishna in 2013 when it chose her as the 'Woman Leader of the Year'. In 2016, *Business Today* elevated her to its 'hall of fame' after listing her among the country's most powerful women for over five years in a row. That was also the year her fall began, with the NSE board and the Securities and Exchange Board of India (SEBI) finding serious governance lapses in the stock exchange she helmed, leading to her resignation in December 2016, 15 months before her tenure was to end. And this February, SEBI, in a 190-page order, claimed that an unknown "spiritual force" had been advising Ramkrishna, the first woman to head a stock exchange in India, on various

NISHIKANT GAMRE

THE RISE & FALL...

The National Stock Exchange (NSE) was set up in 1992 by a group of leading financial institutions at the behest of the Indian government. Among these institutions was the IDBI, or the Industrial Development Bank of India.

CHITRA RAMKRISHNA (left), a trained chartered accountant, started her career as a management trainee at IDBI. Then IDBI chairman S.S. Nadkarni asked her to join the NSE's founding team.

In the initial years, Chitra would travel across the country trying to convince brokers to trade through the NSE. She was instrumental in setting up a pan-India V-SAT network, introduced internet trading and customised products for investors, soon transforming NSE into among the world's top, modern exchanges. In April 2013, she became the first woman to head an exchange in India. In the three and a half years she was at its helm, NSE's average daily turnover doubled to Rs 3.5 lakh crore from Rs 1.6 lakh crore.

She resigned controversially in December 2016, 15 months before her tenure was to expire in March 2018. She was among the 15 people who were served a show-cause notice over what came to be called the **CO-LOCATION SCAM** under her watch. In January 2010, the exchange had started offering a co-location facility, allowing members to place their servers on its premises, a standard practice exchanges across the world offer to mega trading members. Except that a whistleblower known as 'Ken Fong' alerted the SEBI in 2015 of certain brokers colluding with NSE staff to access the fastest servers and using the headstart of a few fractions of a second to make extra millions.

MONEYLIFE

Chitra was also accused of running the NSE like a personal fiefdom and of corporate misgovernance. Eyebrows were also raised over the hiring, proximity and clout of **Anand Subramanian** (right), who was touted as the de facto boss at NSE. He was asked to leave in October 2016, and Chitra was next in line. Except that she chose to put in her papers on the very December morning that she was to be sacked.

A whole new controversy has erupted this year with the appearance of a 'yogi', whom Chitra is said to have passed on confidential information. Some believe Subramanian is the yogi, while others think it is an old-timer who knows the system inside out and is calling the real shots. Chitra was arrested by the CBI on March 6 and sent to 14-days judicial custody on March 14.

aspects of the NSE's functioning. In her response to SEBI, Ramkrishna identified the mysterious person as a "Siddha Purusha" or "yogi" dwelling mostly in the Himalayas. On March 11, the CBI told a special court that the email account through which the yogi was communicating with Ramkrishna was created by Anand Subramanian, whom she hired in 2013 as the NSE's chief strategic officer and who was made the group operating officer (GOO) and advisor to the MD and CEO in 2015. The report of a forensics investigation conducted by Ernst & Young (EY) suggests that the yogi is Subramanian.

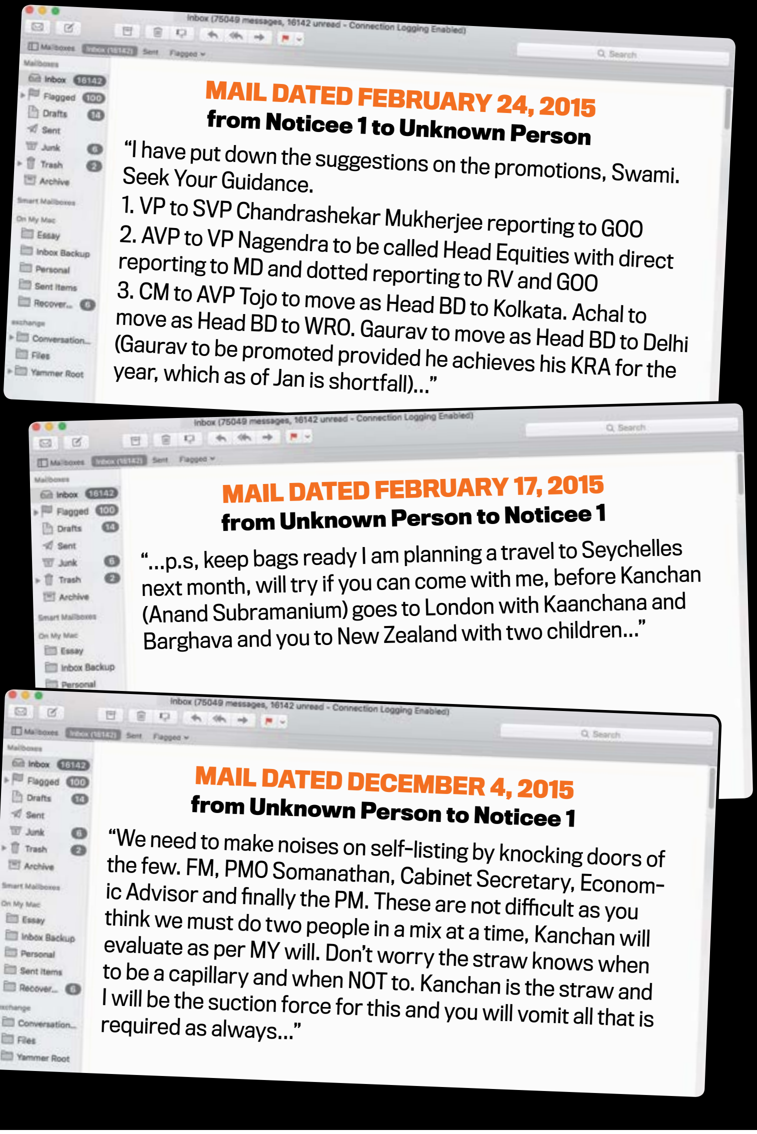
THE MYSTERY YOGI

Subramanian was arrested by the CBI in February, two weeks after the SEBI order indicting Ramkrishna for hiring him in contravention of the rules. According to SEBI, his previous work experience was not relevant to the post he was offered at the NSE with a more than 10-fold hike in remuneration. His salary nearly doubled every year, and in 2016 he was drawing Rs 4.21 crore per annum. Eyebrows were also raised over his proximity to Ramkrishna—in fact, their cabins had an interconnecting door—as well as his growing clout in the organisation. "There were a lot of complaints that he had become the de facto boss," says a former NSE board member.

In October 2016, following complaints to SEBI over his appointment, the board asked Subramanian to leave. "When the board told Ramkrishna that Subramanian has been sacked with immediate effect, she was rattled," recalls the former board member, adding that the board had been recently reconstituted due to concern over corporate governance at the NSE. The former board member reveals that two months later, they decided to remove Ramkrishna too, but she resigned on the morning of the day the board meeting was scheduled. She was given an easy exit and handed everything that was owed to her at the time of settlement—"to avoid exactly what's happening now," says the former board member.

The EY forensics report, which the NSE board accepted, claims that the Skype accounts with usernames anand.subramanian9 and sironmani.10, which were found on Subramanian's NSE desktop, were configured in the Skype application database and linked to Subramanian's mobile number and the yogi's email ID rigyajursama@outlook.com that Ramkrishna was communicating with. Moreover, Word documents sent from the email ID show Subramanian as the author and the images sent have the geo-tag of his Chennai address. A booking made at Umaid Bhawan Palace, Jodhpur, through the email ID corresponds with Subrama-

EMAIL EXCHANGES BETWEEN CHITRA RAMKRISHNA AND THE MYSTERY YOGI, AS EXCERPTED FROM THE SEBI ORDER



MAIL DATED FEBRUARY 24, 2015
from Noticee 1 to Unknown Person

"I have put down the suggestions on the promotions, Swami. Seek Your Guidance.
1. VP to SVP Chandrashekar Mukherjee reporting to GOO
2. AVP to VP Nagendra to be called Head Equities with direct reporting to MD and dotted reporting to RV and GOO
3. CM to AVP Tojo to move as Head BD to Kolkata. Achal to move as Head BD to WRO. Gaurav to move as Head BD to Delhi (Gaurav to be promoted provided he achieves his KRA for the year, which as of Jan is shortfall)..."

MAIL DATED FEBRUARY 17, 2015
from Unknown Person to Noticee 1

"...p.s, keep bags ready I am planning a travel to Seychelles next month, will try if you can come with me, before Kanchan (Anand Subramanium) goes to London with Kaanchana and Barghava and you to New Zealand with two children..."

MAIL DATED DECEMBER 4, 2015
from Unknown Person to Noticee 1

"We need to make noises on self-listing by knocking doors of the few. FM, PMO Somanathan, Cabinet Secretary, Econom-ic Advisor and finally the PM. These are not difficult as you think we must do two people in a mix at a time, Kanchan will evaluate as per MY will. Don't worry the straw knows when to be a capillary and when NOT to. Kanchan is the straw and I will be the suction force for this and you will vomit all that is required as always..."

NSE'S CORE TEAM

DR R.H. PATIL

Founder, Managing Director, NSE

The architect of NSE, he revolutionised and democratised stock trading. Died in 2012, aged 74

RAVI NARAIN

Former chairman, NSE

Was part of the government committee set up in the late 1980s to suggest an overhaul of stock markets and was one of the members who recommended the setting up of NSE. A key member of the founding team, he stepped down in 2017 and was one of the 15 people SEBI sent a showcause notice to in the co-location case. Currently being questioned by CBI

CHITRA RAMKRISHNA

Former CEO, NSE

Part of NSE's founding team along with other colleagues from the IDBI, she rose to become its joint managing director in 2009 and was promoted to CEO in April 2013. While she transformed NSE into one of the most modern exchanges in the world in this time, she also started attracting allegations of corporate misgovernance. Currently under arrest and in CBI custody

RAGHAVAN PUTHRAN

Now reportedly at an ashram near Kolkata

Was with IDBI, before joining NSE in 1993. Quit around 2002 after the Harshad Mehta scam to join the Yogananda ashram in Kolkata

ASHISH CHAUHAN

MD and CEO, BSE

Part of NSE's founding team and worked there from 1993-2000

K. KUMAR

MD and CEO, ICCL

Was part of the founding team of NSE and worked at NSE from 1993-99

nian's bank statement that shows a payment of Rs 2.4 lakh made to the hotel around the same time.

SEBI whole-time member Ananta Barua, however, has held that the report doesn't conclusively prove that Subramanian is the yogi. Market insiders don't buy that story. The communication between the yogi and Ramkrishna included details and conversations about internal movements in the company. Like this excerpt from the SEBI report: "Seema is a darling child, she requires polishing, everyone has a godfather for [their] growth... so she can be promoted and moved to SME as head and also be management representative for business excellence... Rachana may be moved back as regulatory head... Tojo to Kolkata and Achal to Delhi..."

Though SEBI isn't convinced that Subramanian is the mystery yogi who was in the know of the minute details of the NSE's functioning, he does emerge as the clear beneficiary of the yogi's directions. The mail trail shows the yogi appearing to demand a cut of Subramanian's pay—"Kanchan to withdraw and surrender to me per month as gratitude on gross amount," reads a mail cited in the EY report. However, as 'Kanchan' is an alias for Subramanian, who is also believed to be the yogi, this may be an attempt at misdirection.

Moreover, while Ramkrishna has said she had been following the yogi's directions for 20 years, and the yogi clearly has intricate knowledge of not just the NSE's structure and functioning, but also about equity markets, Subramanian had no experience in the field before joining the NSE. Those who have worked with him have also raised doubts about his technical skills. Also, it is difficult to believe that Ramkrishna and Subramanian, whose camaraderie is well known, would leave a mail trail when their cabins were interconnected and they could easily have shared information face-to-face. The yogi's emails relate to internal matters of the NSE—promotions, listing, board seats and so on—and he understands the organisation like an old-timer would. The information shared includes NSE's dividend payout, organisation structure, financial results, human resources policy, business plans and appraisals—details that senior management would be privy to.

While dismissing EY's suggestion that Subramanian is the yogi, SEBI didn't try to find out who might have been using the rigyajursama email ID. According to Nishant Singh, founder and MD of Forensic Investigation and Consultancy Services, any state cyber cell can identify the mysterious person by finding the locations from where the email account was accessed. "It's really not a big deal at all," he says.

MAKING OF THE NSE

It was 1992. In the wake of the Harshad Mehta scam at the Bombay Stock Exchange (BSE), the government was keen to bring transparency to Indian capital markets. That was when the Industrial Development Bank of India (IDBI) took the lead among top financial institutions to set up the NSE. It was incorporated in 1992 and recognised as an exchange the following year. Ramkrishna, who had joined IDBI's project finance division in 1985, was among the core team put together by then IDBI chairman S.S. Nadkarni to build NSE from scratch and counter the dominance of the BSE. Leading the team was then IDBI executive director R.H. Patil. The others were Ravi Narain, who headed the NSE from 1994 to March 2013 until Ramkrishna took over; Ashish Chauhan, who moved on from the NSE and eventually helmed the BSE; and Raghavan Putran, who took an apparently spiritual turn after quitting NSE around 2002, joined the mission of Yogananda Paramahansa and is reportedly staying in an ashram near Kolkata (see *NSE's Core Team*). NSE insiders say that in the 2001 stock market scam, while the entire BSE board was superseded, dealings of the Automated Lending and Borrowing Mechanism under Putran were not thoroughly probed. He was given a quiet exit and remained as a consultant for several years.

As part of the founding team at the NSE, Ramkrishna played a key role in arranging the development of a technology platform that made trading at the stock exchange transparent and at par with world standards. There was staunch resistance from the broker community as the automated screen-based trading system she was instrumental in setting up was changing the rules of the game. "She had to fight the brokers and she did leverage her position to make sure that the NSE scored over BSE in terms of access to the powers-that-be—the regulator, ministry and the broker community," says one of the top fund managers in the country who has decades of experience in the stock markets. A force to reckon with, Ramkrishna wielded immense power in the stockbroking community—with the brokers, the market regulator and the top bosses at North Block in New Delhi, including a former finance minister and a key bureaucrat. At the NSE, she ran a tight ship, and was both revered and feared.

After she took over as MD and CEO, NSE's daily average turnover, including both cash and derivatives, doubled to Rs 3.5 trillion from Rs 1.6 trillion in the three-and-a-half years she was at the helm. She travelled across the country in the early years of setting up the exchange, convincing brokers to trade through the NSE. Emerging as a challenger to the BSE, over time, the NSE became the dominant force. At meetings called by market regulator SEBI, Ramkrishna often drove the agenda. The top management of the NSE also had the blessings of the UPA government and considerable clout with SEBI. In fact, brokers in Mumbai did not want to be seen on the wrong side of the NSE. Market insiders say brokers would be questioned for the same actions at the BSE that they could get away with at the NSE.

> **THOUGH CBI SUSPECTS THAT SUBRAMANIAN IS THE YOGI, CHITRA'S MENTOR COMES ACROSS AS AN OLD-TIMER FAMILIAR WITH NSE'S STRUCTURE AND FUNCTIONING**

While she was making her contributions to transforming the face of stock markets in India, Ramkrishna was handsomely rewarded. She made Rs 44 crore in a little over three years as MD and CEO of the NSE, including Rs 18 crore as remuneration in her final eight months in office before she resigned in December 2016.

BEGINNING OF THE END

In 2015, SEBI received a complaint against the NSE from a whistleblower going by the name of 'Ken Fong', alerting it to what has come to be known as the co-location scam. The allegation was that some brokers could connect to the fastest servers at the NSE with the help of the staff, thereby gaining advantage of a few fractions of a second, which translated into massive gains in the cut-throat environment where a headstart of even a few milliseconds could mean lakhs of rupees for those benefiting from the information.

In January 2010, NSE had started offering a co-location facility allowing members to place their servers in the exchange's premises in return for a fee. This gave them the advantage of faster access to execute orders because these spaces were right next to the exchange servers. Though exchanges across the world offer co-location facilities to mega trading members whose trading volumes exceed a certain minimum, critics say it gives them an unfair advantage as when one gets information makes a big difference to traders.

The whistleblower's complaint set off the train of events that led to Ramkrishna stepping down as MD and CEO of NSE in 2016, and eventually to her recent arrest. Many questions have remained unanswered so far, such as the identity of the mysterious yogi who was in touch with her for years and the full extent of the scam whose surface the SEBI report has barely scratched. ■

Communal Catharsis

In telling the story of the Pandits' brutal expulsion from the Valley, Vivek Agnihotri's *The Kashmir Files* ends up caricaturing voices of dissent

By **SUHANI SINGH**

Few would have predicted that a nearly three-hour-long, A-rated heavy political drama on the persecution of Kashmiri Pandits by separatist militants and their subsequent exodus from the Valley in 1989-90 would become a blockbuster. Made on an estimated budget of Rs 15 crore, *The Kashmir Files* amassed around Rs 60 crore within five days of its release, with the collections growing by the day. Trade forecasts suggest that, at this pace, the film will collect Rs 300 crore. *The Kashmir Files* has struck such a chord with the audience that multiplexes are adding more shows to meet the demand and single screens are embracing the film, especially in the Hindi-speaking belt. Written and directed by Vivek Ranjan Agnihotri, best known thus far for *Hate Story* and *The Tashkent Files*, the plot of *The Kashmir Files* revolves around Krishna (Darshan Kumar), a young Kashmiri Pandit who travels to Kashmir to fulfil his grandfather's (Anupam Kher) last wish: spread his ashes in the ancestral house they were forced to leave in January 1990, and involve his four friends in the act. Over the course of two days, Krishna confronts, seemingly for the first time, the atrocities the community endured and learns the grim truth about family members who perished.

It isn't, however, just a film about the plight of the people who became refugees in their own country. Agnihotri uses the tragedy to launch a broadside against his favourite bete noir: 'liberals', most prominently caricatured here by a professor (played by Agnihotri's wife Pallavi Joshi) who vilifies the government for its atrocities on Kashmir's Muslim majority and seeks to 'appease' Kashmiri Muslim students on the campus of 'ANU' (reminiscent of Delhi's JNU). She's the kohl-eyed, smiling provocateur who sings Faiz Ahmed Faiz's *Hum Dekhenge* and whose favourite word is most likely 'Azaadi'. Agnihotri paints a picture of an academic haven of callous left-wingers who are either ignorant of, or indifferent to, the plight of Kashmiri Pandits.

Audiences have lapped up Agnihotri's political agenda. One of the film's fans is Aditya Dhar, a Kashmiri Pandit better known as the National Award-winning director of *Uri: The Surgical Strike*, which, much like *The Kashmir Files*, confounded expectations and collected Rs 244 crore against a budget of Rs 28 crore. "You might have seen numerous videos of Kashmiri Pandits breaking down in the theatres after watching #TheKashmirFiles. The emotion is real," Dhar wrote on Twitter. "It shows how long we kept our pain and tragedy repressed as a community. We didn't have any shoulder to cry on and no ear to hear our pleas... Being a filmmaker myself, I couldn't have made a better film than this on my own tragedy."

A HATE STORY?

Not everyone concurs though. Some film critics have accused Agnihotri of presenting a lop-sided reading of history. "Mounted like a revisionist docudrama...*The Kashmir Files* is essentially a battle of narratives where Agnihotri has determinedly sided with one version of the events. Employing some facts, some half-truths, and plenty of distortions, it propels an alternative view about the Kashmir issue, with the intent to not just provoke...but incite," wrote Anuj Kumar of *The Hindu*.

Polarised opinions have only fuelled discussion of the film, now a hot topic on WhatsApp groups and news channels. Social media is abuzz with threads on Kashmiri Pandits and Kashmir politics, and trolls attacking negative reviews or reactions. While inflammatory memes proliferated, some people shared a 2013 tweet by the film's biggest star, Anupam Kher, in which he had counselled empathy: "I see some people making Kashmiri Pandit's Exodus outcry into a religious thing. It is NOT. It is about Human Sufferings. Hindu or Muslim. [sic]"

The divisiveness Kher was concerned about has manifested at

BEHIND THE BIG BUZZ

- After opening to Rs 3.25 crore on day one, word-of-mouth publicity, social media chatter and news coverage are taking the film to hit the Rs 100 crore mark in a week
- The film has been made tax-free in BJP-ruled states such as UP, Goa, Tripura, Madhya Pradesh, Karnataka, Haryana and Gujarat. In Assam, the government is granting its employees a half-day leave to catch the 2-hour, 50-minute movie
- Many companies are extending support to the film. For example, the Dalmia Bharat Group has offered to book tickets for its employees and "their spouses (only) in Delhi"

PAST RECAST
Pallavi Joshi (left) plays the role of a 'liberal' professor in Vivek Agnihotri's (below left) *The Kashmir Files*, which also stars Mithun Chakraborty (below)

least in some centres where the film is running to full houses. Viral clips depict sections of the audience at one screening chanting slogans vilifying Muslims. In one clip, a man wants audiences to boycott films of the three Khans—Salman, Shah Rukh and Aamir; in another, a man in a Delhi cinema says that so long as there is "secular India", Hindus will keep getting killed, and suggests a grim fate for Hindus in Kerala, West Bengal and Punjab, states that didn't vote for BJP governments.

POLITICS MATTER

The film has been prominently embraced by BJP politicians and state governments, several of which have granted it tax-free status. In Madhya Pradesh, the Shivraj Singh Chouhan government is granting police officials leave to watch the film. On March 12, a day after the film's release, Agnihotri and his actress wife Pallavi met Prime Minister Narendra Modi. By Sunday, March 13, the film had collected Rs 15 crore, doubling its earnings in a day. In a BJP parliamentary meet on March 15, Modi said more such films should be made. He also defended Agnihotri against allegations of inciting hatred against Kashmiri Muslims. "Those who claim to be custodians of freedom of expression have lost their sense in the last few days. Instead of evaluating the movie on the basis of facts and art, they are running a campaign to discredit it," said Modi. "My issue is not a film. My concern is that whatever is the truth needs to be presented in the right manner for the good of the country. If one wants, they can bring another movie on the same issue with a different perspective."

IN AGNIHOTRI'S FILM, MOST KASHMIRI MUSLIMS ARE SHOWN AS PAKISTAN-LOVING, HINDU-HATING TERRORISTS

But can they? *Parzania*, Rahul Dholakia's film on the 2002 Gujarat riots, was never screened in that state, where cinema owners feared a backlash. Recent years have seen more explicit political decisions deciding the fate of cinema. BJP-ruled Rajasthan refused to release *Padmaavat*; Uttarakhand denied screens to *Kedarnath* as it showed a romance between a Hindu girl and a Muslim man. Netflix series *Leila*, set in a dystopian India where Hindu fundamentalists reign supreme, never got a Season 2 after right-wing backlash.

The Kashmir Files is not the first film on violence in Kashmir. Hindi cinema has addressed militancy (*Mission Kashmir*, *Yahaan*) and the psychological scars it has left on people (*Haider*). Tamil filmmaker Mani Ratnam looked at the insurgency in the 1990s in his acclaimed romantic drama *Roja*. In 2020, writer-director Vidhu Vinod Chopra, a Kashmiri Pandit, made *Shikara*, a love story about a Pandit couple unable to overcome the scars of the turbulent past. He cast a Kashmiri Muslim, Sadia Khateeb, to play the leading lady, Shanti.

What sets *The Kashmir Files* apart from these narratives is that it is "catering to a right-wing sensibility in sync with the current mood of the nation", says Shailesh Kapoor, founder-CEO of Ormax Media, a media analytics and consulting firm. "People are connecting with the Hindu lens of the story. It is not so much the Kashmir issue and more about 'This happened to the Hindus'."

Agnihotri has been upfront that the Pandits—Hindus—are his priority and refrains from adopting a measured tone. Most Kashmiri Muslims are shown as Pakistan-loving, Hindu-hating terrorists. Loud sloganeering against Pandits and hard-hitting scenes of violence against Hindus, occasionally involving kids, makes for visceral horror set against a political backdrop.

The filmmaker, however, is selective in his reading of politics. Pakistan's involvement in inciting locals isn't given much screen time. Former chief minister Farooq Abdullah is named and shamed, but there's no mention of then PM V.P. Singh, whose government had the BJP's support when the tragic events the film seeks to describe unfolded.

The really affecting bits are when Agnihotri casts an empathetic gaze on the Pandits' sense of alienation and loss. In a dialogue harking back to Vivek Oberoi-starrer *PM Narendra Modi*, Kher's character says, "*Kashmir jal raha hai* (Kashmir is burning)". In the refugee camp, he carries a placard reading "Remove Article 370" and calls for the rehabilitation of Pandits. Almost three decades after the exodus, Article 370 was done away with. But the Pandits' return remains an elusive dream. ■

Casting the Net Wide

TWO MAHARASHTRA POLICE OFFICERS CRACK BIG CYBER OFFENCE CASES AT A TIME WHEN THE FORCE IS ON THE DEFENSIVE

BY KIRAN D. TARE

ANI

Like most states in India, Maharashtra and capital Mumbai have been plagued by a surge in cyber crimes in the recent past. In 2021, 2,883 cases of cyber crimes were registered in the state; only 16 per cent were solved. Most of the cases involved people being duped of their money online but what has officials worried is the increasing instances of hate crimes and online harassment. At a time when the Maharashtra and Mumbai police are embroiled in a series of unsavoury situations of its own making, this has only added to its problems. The silver lining is that a few officers have stepped up to retrieve the situation for the force.

For Dr Rashmi Karandikar, the new year began with a complaint about a mobile application, ‘Bulli Bai’, which was apparently holding a so-called ‘virtual auction’ of around 100 Muslim women. It was a Sunday, normally a holiday, when Karandikar, deputy commissioner of police (cyber security), started tracking the perpetrators. It was a daunting task, for Bulli Bai was uploaded on a code hosting platform, GitHub, located in the US and out of bounds for domestic investigation agencies. While screening Twitter, Karandikar found a handle, @BulliBai, which boasted that they were the creators of the app. It was an opening but it gave away little as the handle had only five followers, all heavily masked and all of whom had started deleting their tweets following the public uproar. Tracing their social media footprint and zeroing in on the perpetrators would prove to be quite a challenge.

Karandikar, a 2004-batch state police service officer, kept trawling Twitter and found that one of the suspected accounts was two months old. After scrolling through some 20,000 tweets, she noticed that the handler had changed his name 17

> “In India, we have had the IT Act only since 2000. Cyber crimes have surpassed traditional ones now and the police need to stay one step ahead”
>
> **–AMITABH GUPTA**
> *Police Commissioner, Pune*

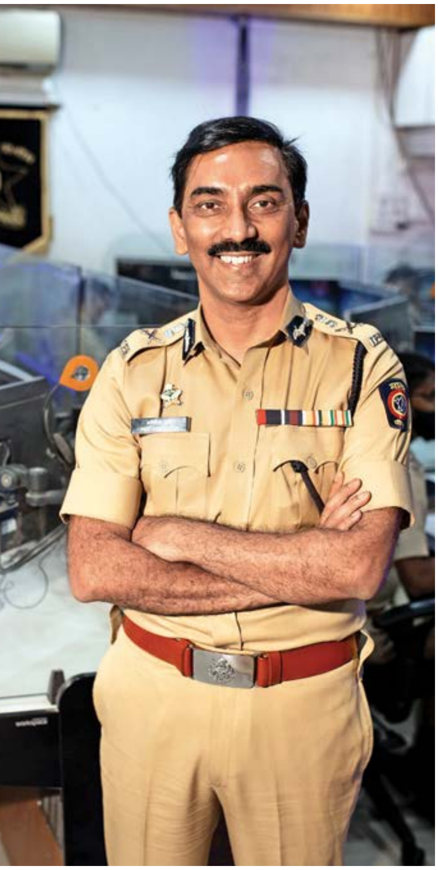
CYBER TRACKING Shweta Singh and Mayank Rawat, accused in the Bulli Bai case, at the Bandra Court, Mumbai

times. Social media users from Kolkata, Delhi, Bengaluru and Hyderabad provided her with vital information on the suspects. Soon, she had a concrete lead. Her team nabbed Vishal Jha, 21, an engineering student, from Bengaluru on January 4, and Shweta Singh, 18, and Mayank Rawat, 21, from Uttarakhand a day later. Singh named ‘Giyu’, an online friend from Nepal, and said he had instructed her on how to post the women’s pictures. By now, it was certain ‘Giyu’ was the mastermind, but tracing him was another challenge.

Furious with the arrest of his friends, Giyu started posting angry tweets on his handle, @giyu@007, challenging the Mumbai police. “In a fit of rage, he posted a few hundred tweets in a day. We were waiting for him to slip up,” says Karandikar. Among the tweets was a notice issued by Delhi Police to GitHub seeking details of the ‘Bulli Bai’ creators. As per procedure, GitHub had e-mailed the notice to the app’s creator, Giyu. “It was the confirmation we needed,” she says. Later, it became clear that Giyu was Niraj Bishnoi from Jorhat, Assam, a student of Vellore Institute of Technology (VIT), Bhopal.

Even before the dust settled over ‘Bulli Bai’, a similar case pertaining to social media platform Clubhouse was reported. Discussions here included more inflamma-

> **“Social media platforms must have an algorithm that factors in women’s safety and identifies and tags ‘malcontent’...it’s their responsibility”**
>
> **–RASHMI KARANDIKAR**
> *Dy Commissioner, Cyber Security*



ABHIJIT PATIL

MANDAR DEODHAR

tory 'virtual auctions' describing the anatomy of Hindu and Muslim women and tips on how to rape them. The accounts, with fake names like 'KiraXD' and 'Bismillah' and fake photographs, were deactivated later. A Mumbai-based woman who was active in the chats led the police to other accounts and finally to KiraXD. On January 21, Karandikar's team arrested Jaishnav Kakkar, 21, and Yash Parashar, 22, from Faridabad and Akash Suyal, 19, from Karnal, Haryana. Kakkar and Parashar were students of commerce and law, respectively. Suyal had completed his Class 12.

Karandikar, a student of sociology and anthropology and a trained ethical hacker, says all social media platforms "must have an algorithm that factors in women's safety and identifies and tags 'malcontent'...it's their responsibility". She also feels "cyber education" is crucial. "Social media is now an integral part of our psychology. People who wouldn't use derogatory words against women in physical interactions, use such vulgar language on social media," she says. Karandikar, whose team is 60 per cent female, says her biggest takeaway from the 'Bulli Bai' case is that "a message has gone out to criminals that we will catch you, no matter what".

TECHNOCRAT COP

When Amitabh Gupta was appointed Pune police commissioner in August 2020, many had doubts whether the soft-spoken, affable IPS officer was up to the task. A year-and-a-half later, Gupta, a gold medallist from IIT-Kanpur, has proved them all wrong. He has not only done a 'cleansing operation' of criminals in the city but also exposed three state recruitment scams, maybe the biggest in Maharashtra so far.

Gupta overhauled the Pune Police cyber cell, expanding the number of units from two to five and training over 100 officers in investigating cyber crimes. In October 2021, complaints regarding question paper leaks in the health department's recruitment drive were filed in Pune, Beed, Latur and Aurangabad, but it was the Pune police who initiated the investigation. By December end, 19 people had been arrested in the case.

Acting on a tip-off, Gupta's team also exposed another recruitment scam in MHADA (Maharashtra Housing and Development Authority) on December 12, 2021. The Maharashtra government had outsourced the work of conducting the exam to a private firm, G.A. Solution Technologies. The Pune police arrested its director Pritish Deshmukh and two others and retrieved a laptop and pen drive that contained exam-related documents.

Gupta's investigation also led to the uncovering of another recruitment scam in the Teachers Eligibility Test (TET) conducted in 2018 and 2020. The perpetrators 'upgraded' the mark sheet of candidates for a fee. At the height of the scam, several candidates were even delivered bogus pass certificates. One of the candidates had noted the questions and answers on a paper, clicked its picture and sent it to his cousin. That was the moment the leaked paper was digitally transported for the first time and was enough evidence for the cyber cell to zero in on the culprits.

The success in the Bulli Bai and other cases has been a shot in the arm for the Maharashtra police, which has seen top officials caught in unsavoury situations

The Pune police made the first arrest in the case on December 26, 2021, a week after the FIR was registered. "The scam was so widespread that 47 per cent of the candidates who took the exam had paid money to get their marks fixed," says Gupta. A total of 16,705 candidates had appeared for the TET in January 2020; 7,880 passed the exam. The accused had taken an average Rs 3 lakh from a candidate, making it the state's biggest-ever recruitment scam. Twenty-three people have been arrested so far.

Gupta's mettle was tested when the name of an IAS official, Sushil Khodwekar, cropped up in the case. The cyber cell had accessed the WhatsApp records of an accused, Abhijit Savrikar, when they came upon the chats between him and the agriculture department deputy secretary. Gupta says the conversation pertains to the money exchanged in the case; Khodwekar was previously deputy secretary, school education and sports department. His arrest on January 29 sent shockwaves through the state bureaucracy.

Gupta had earlier served in Naxal-affected Gadchiroli and Osmanabad. His initiative, '*Ek gaanv, ek Ganpati* (One Ganesh idol per village)' while he was Osmanabad SP was widely appreciated as a measure to reduce noise and water pollution during Ganeshotsav. The initiative was replicated in several other parts of the state. In Pune, he has done wonders to popularise the Twitter handle @punecitypolice, while 'My Safe Pune', an initiative in which women can mark unsafe spots in the city, has also been a success.

Gupta has also taken some hits, especially in his earlier stint as principal secretary (home). He issued a travel pass to tainted builder Rakesh Wadhawan, an accused in the PMC Bank scam, during the national lockdown in April 2020, for which he was sent on compulsory leave. Gupta was absolved with a clean chit later.

An avid trekker and swimmer, Gupta says gangsters are the real threat in the state but admits that the common man is more worried about street crimes and traffic congestion. "The police have to be people-friendly and also be aware of social media mores these days," he says. The anonymity of the internet is proving to be a great incentive for crime. ■

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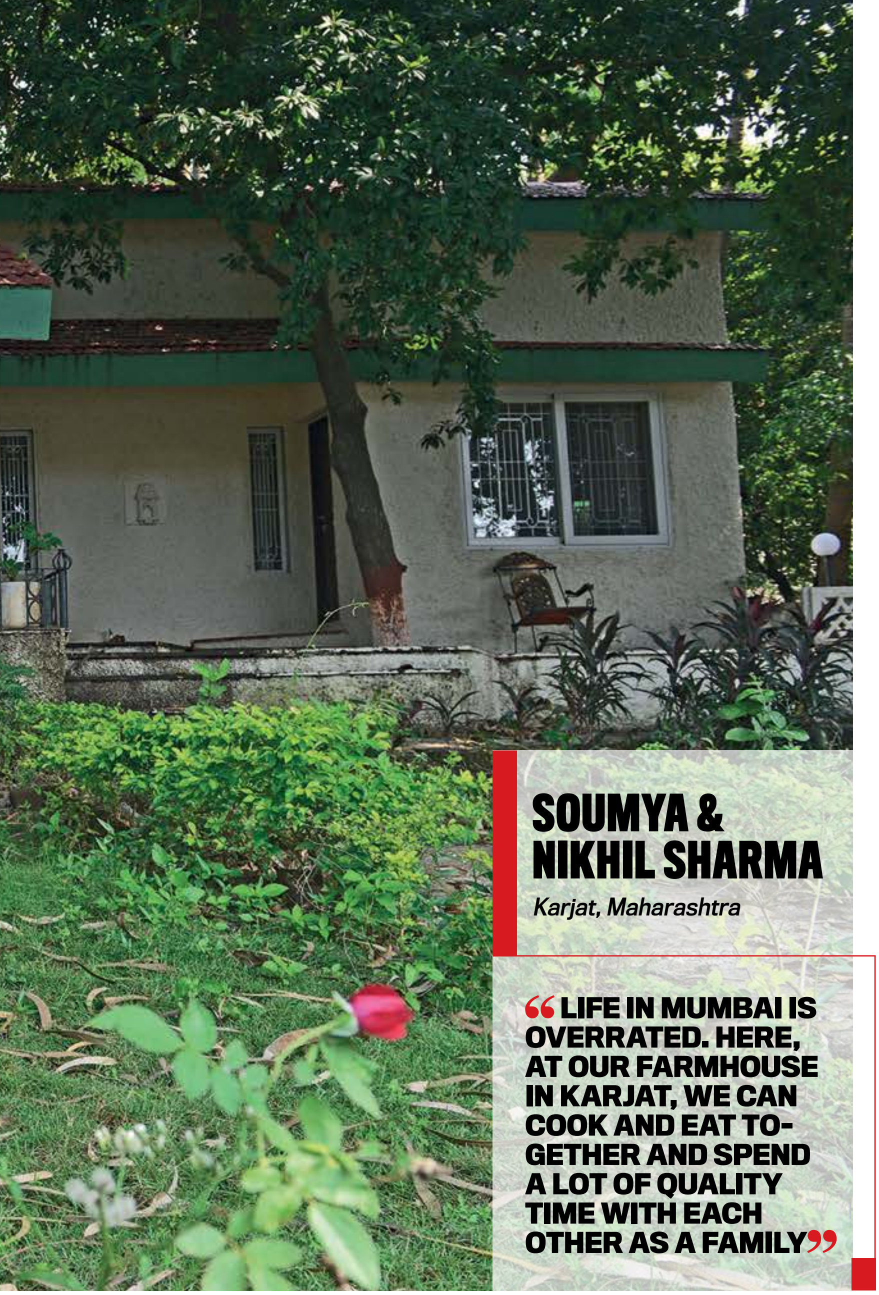
GOODBYE, BIG CITY

The desire for a simpler, cleaner, stress-free life is driving people to invest in second homes far from the metros's madding crowds

By Sonali Acharjee



SOUMYA & NIKHIL SHARMA

Karjat, Maharashtra

> **“LIFE IN MUMBAI IS OVERRATED. HERE, AT OUR FARMHOUSE IN KARJAT, WE CAN COOK AND EAT TOGETHER AND SPEND A LOT OF QUALITY TIME WITH EACH OTHER AS A FAMILY”**

MANDAR DEODHAR

A few weeks after the Covid-induced lockdown was announced in March 2020, Soumya Sharma, 27, and her family of five decided to spend a few days at their spacious farmhouse in Karjat, located barely 65 km from Mumbai. That plan of ‘few days’ kept getting extended until the family realised that they were happier living on the farm rather than in the city. However, Sharma’s job as a news analyst needed her to go ‘on air’ from home and the farmhouse didn’t have good internet connectivity. But a good wi-fi connection fixed this small hurdle and the young couple started working from their farmhouse. “We started enjoying this life. There’s a river running across our property and it was lovely to walk around and soak in the clean, crisp air after work, something we don’t get in Mumbai,” says Sharma.

Now, the family goes to the local supermarket every few days to stock up on provisions and make a trip to Mumbai usually once a week for work. “But we have shifted our base to Karjat. From being our second home, the farmhouse has become our first home,” says Sharma, adding that the family doesn’t feel like it’s missing out on anything. “Mumbai is highly overrated. Here, we can cook and eat together and spend a lot of quality time with each other as a family,” she says. The shift “back to the basics” has been refreshing. “Covid has made us realise that it is the small things that give us a lot more happiness,” she says.

Like the Sharma clan, many families are increasingly spending time away from larger cities. Remote working, made increasingly possible by the pandemic’s work from home (WFH) compulsions, has made life in cities unattractive for many. A 2021 survey by NoBroker.com, a real estate platform, shows that 82 per cent of their users want a second home away from the city. The CII-Anarock Consumer Sentiment Survey, conducted between January and June 2021 among 4,965 participants, also points to a growing consumer interest in greener environments. Around 68 per cent of the respondents expressed a desire to own property in peripheral or suburban areas; 72 per cent designated walking trails as a must-have; and 68 per cent expressed a keenness to have adequate open green spaces. Another survey, conducted late last year by Savills India, a global property consultant, pointed out that 70 per cent of their respondents want a second home in the next two years, which they plan on using for at least the next five years. Most of this interest is being driven by concerns for children, elders and a desire for a safer, healthier way of life.

“During the pandemic, people moved out of their homes and did short-term stays at Airbnb properties. It made them realise that remote working is possibly here to stay and they could consider a life away from the city more permanently. People are now thinking of living in towns at a drive of two to three hours from the city,” says Shobhan Kothari, architect and partner at ADND, an architectural firm in Mumbai. He adds that for his clients in Maharashtra, the most desired destination for a second home was Lonavala for a long time. “Alibaug was known, but was relatively less popular. But now, Alibaug has become a popular choice for a second home. There are also towns like Karjat that are becoming popular,” says Kothari.

PARADISE FOUND

The disillusionment with urban living is driving ambitious new property developments offering all mod cons far away from the city

▲ **BROOKS ARTHAUS**
Bhimtal, Uttarakhand
Area of entire development: **3 acres**
Area of houses: **1,400-3,500 sq. ft**
Price: **Rs 1.25-2 crore**

▲ **TATA MYST**
Kasauli, Himachal Pradesh
Area of entire development: **12 acres**
Area of houses: **253-3,009 sq. ft**
Price: **Rs 75 lakh (starting price)**

According to Nilanjan Bhowal, principal architect at Design Consortium India, the demand for second homes has doubled since the pandemic. “Second homes were earlier a statement of opulence, a symbol of luxury. Now people have realised that investments in second homes away from the metros give much better returns. Second homes are more reasonably priced compared to a similar property in the metro. When not being used by the owners, second homes can be easily put on Airbnb because these days people prefer staying in smaller villas in quaint locations rather than big hotels. So, they are a good investment option. Plus, one can go and enjoy a stay with their family whenever they want,” says Bhowal.

The growing demand for such properties is also evident in how major real estate developers are now offering second homes in Tier 2 and 3 towns. Bhowal’s firm has designed a premium gated community, Brooks Arthaus, in Bhimtal, Uttarakhand; Tatas have set up eco-friendly villas in Kasauli, Himachal Pradesh; DLF has residential offerings in Shimla and Kasauli in Himachal and Goa; and the Mahindra and Hiranandani Groups both have luxury villa projects in Alibaug.

Nitish Mukherjee, 63, and his wife invested in a second home in Brooks Arthaus a year and a half ago. What really surprised him about their new home, says Mukherjee, was how much his 30-something son and his wife took to the property. While he and his wife moved to Bhimtal for a better quality of retired life, his children, employed in corporate jobs, have enjoyed working from the home in the hills. “We still have an independent house in Delhi but increasingly we are spending more time in Bhimtal. This is also due to the fact that the place has much better connectivity today than before. This doesn’t mean that we don’t face problems such as torrential rain, floods and so on, but overall, we are happier and feel more productive there,” says Mukherjee. The couple enjoy connecting with villagers and feel they are able to give back to society more in Bhimtal than they could in the city. “We have always lived in urban settings and, for a while, were looking for a space where we could have a stronger sense of community, as well as be able to fit in exercise as a natural part of our daily life as opposed to by going to a gym.” The pandemic was not the reason for the Mukherjees to spend more time in their second home, but it did make them aware that time is fleeting.

Bhowal says he has observed similar sentiments among many people. “Covid has made people realise that one must live life to discover oneself in harmony with nature. One can live sustainably amid lush green meadows and hills and experience life beyond just working for a living in the city,” he says.

Today, many middle-class individuals and families are also investing in second homes. “I have a long-term rent arrangement with a cottage owner in Dharamshala. I pay only Rs 15,000 a month for a 2BHK property with a garden—one-fourth of what a similar home costs me in Delhi,” says Abhirup Roy, a 39-year-old engineer who shifted from the NCR to Himachal Pradesh late last year.

Some suburban collective projects also make the proposition of a second home more affordable by dividing the cost between a group of people. WeCommunities, a brand of Vivasv Infra, in Bengaluru and Rajasthan, for example, specialises in sustainable living collectives where like-minded people can forge a deeper connection with nature. Individuals buy small portions of a farm as part of a collective, which together purchases a larger estate—around 80-100 acres—and convert it into a low-footprint, organic, farm with the necessary infrastructure. Members often buy homes near

▲ ZUARI RAIN FOREST
Goa
Area of entire development: **20 acres**
Area of houses: **800-2,600 sq. ft**
Price: **Rs 75 lakh (starting price)**

▲ MAHINDRA MERIDIAN
Alibaug, Maharashtra
Area of entire development: **N/A**
Area of houses: **3,000-3,300 sq. ft**
Price: **Rs 4.1 crore**

▲ DLF SAMAVANA, SOLAN
Himachal Pradesh
Area of entire development: **58 acres**
Area of houses: **560-2,096 sq. ft**
Price: **Rs 1.05 crore (starting price)**

SHOBHAN KOTHARI
Architect and Partner, ADND

> **“THE MAJOR REQUIREMENTS THAT PEOPLE HAVE FROM A SECOND HOME IS THAT IT SHOULD BE WELL-VENTILATED, WELL-LIT AND WELL-CONNECTED WITH THE OUTDOORS”**

such farms to be an active part of the overall process. Such collectives not only help connect people with similar passions but also provide a healthier environment to live in. “I lived in Noida because of work, but apart from that I felt no real connection to the NCR area,” says Virah Kapur. “I did not know my neighbours, I was not interested in the local problems and I never enjoyed my life there,” says the 33-year-old. The minute Kapur, an expat placement consultant, began working remotely, he grabbed the opportunity to rent out a second flat on the outskirts of Nainital. “My neighbours and I together have set up a lush green terrace farm and I’m now involved in teaching the children of my house help. It is a smaller community, but I feel more cared for, more invested in my surroundings.” In November 2021, he moved his mother from Delhi to live with him in Nainital due to health concerns. “She was having trouble breathing in the city. It was difficult to get her to leave our ancestral home but it was a matter of her health and overall quality of life.”

BREATHING FREE

Pollution is one of the greatest fears of city dwellers. Delhi recorded an increase of 125 per cent in NO_2 (nitrogen dioxide) pollution between April 2020 and April 2021, according to a Greenpeace India study which analysed NO_2 concentrations in India’s eight most populous state capitals—Mumbai, Delhi, Bengaluru, Hyderabad, Chennai, Kolkata, Jaipur and Lucknow. Pollution from NO_2 increased in all of the eight cities surveyed. And the increase has had its impact on the overall respiratory health of many residents.

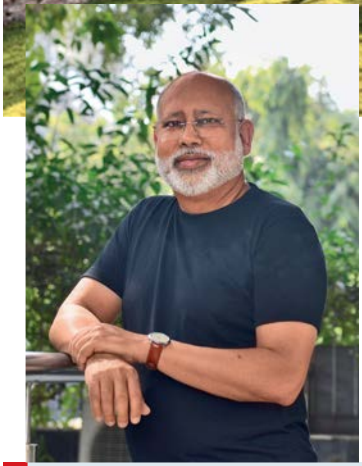
Dr Davinder Kundra, a Delhi-based pulmonologist, says: “The elderly find life in polluted spaces particularly difficult because their lungs are already weakened by age. Moreover, many are forced by their families to stay indoors when the pollution is high and this impacts their mental and physical wellbeing in other ways—the stress of not going out, of not being able to meet people, of not being mobile and independent.”

The winter of 2021 was particularly difficult for residents in high-pollution areas. Tarun Mahar, 51, was confined to his home in Noida for almost a month after his asthma was aggravated. He had already survived a severe bout of Covid earlier in the year. In December, he decided to move in with a friend at the latter’s family home in Palakkad, Kerala. “I loved it so much that I am now looking to buy a place of my own here. The air is clean, almost heady with freshness, and I have found it far easier to breathe here,” he says.

OTHER STRESS TRIGGERS

Pollution, though, isn’t the only factor impacting health in cities. Other health concerns are also driving people to smaller towns and cities. A survey by community social media platform LocalCircles found that 45 per cent of the people surveyed in Delhi knew someone in their family or local social network who had been impacted by dengue in 2021. The survey was conducted among 14,974 Delhi-NCR

A home at the Brooks Arthaus development in Bhimtal, Uttarakhand



RAJWNAT RAWAT

NITISH MUKHERJEE

Bhimtal, Uttarakhand

> **“WE WERE LOOKING FOR A SPACE WHERE WE COULD HAVE A STRONGER SENSE OF COMMUNITY, AS WELL AS BE ABLE TO FIT IN EXERCISE AS A NATURAL PART OF OUR DAILY LIFE”**

residents. Moreover, apart from the usual suspects—traffic jams, diseases, crime and a high cost of living—the pandemic has brought added stress into people’s lives. Dr Kedar Tilwe, a Mumbai-based psychiatrist, says, “Anxiety is common today. Covid has depleted a lot of people’s capacities to handle such stress. And so, while traffic might not have impacted someone two years ago, today, people consciously want to move towards a life of less stress, more positivity and relaxation. Stress that is not necessary should be avoided for mental peace and wellbeing.” In the TomTom Traffic Index, a global list, Mumbai was ranked second, Bengaluru sixth, Delhi eighth and Pune 16th among 416 cities across 56 countries on traffic congestion.

In Delhi, the unemployment rate is also at a four-month high of 16.8 per cent, according to data for September from the Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy (CMIE). Latest Delhi Police data reveals that street crimes against women, like snatchings and robberies, had increased 30-40 per cent in 2021. “I think the pandemic has rejigged people’s focus and a priority for many now is to upgrade their life through better jobs, homes, healthcare, social connections and living spaces,” adds Dr Tilwe.

INVESTING IN HAPPINESS

Sharma feels her family has gained more than just a safer, healthier space to live in. They have also flourished professionally. For example, her mother-in-law, an investment and tax consultant, started juggling her professional assignments with teaching local Adivasi children. “We saw how several children at the farm didn’t have access to even basic education. We always wanted to give back to society and my mother-in-law saw this as an opportunity to help,” says Sharma. The school at Savale village, a short drive from their family home, offers skills-based training to women and children. Sharma quit her job in January this year and is now assisting her husband, Nikhil, with his start-up, a gamified version of a stock exchange for cricket. This new entrepreneurial venture has the couple shuttling between Pune and their new home in Karjat.

The investment in a better quality of life is also evident in the nature of homes people are building outside cities. “No two families are identical and every family comes with its own set of requirements. But the purpose of building a second home is always to create a space to enjoy life away from the hustle and bustle of the city,” says Kothari. He also believes that it is important to make sure that there is enough elbow room to feel free and promote oneness with nature. “The major requirements that people have from a second home is that it should be well-lit, well-ventilated and well-connected with the outdoors.”

With the pandemic making WFH common and highlighting the importance of health, the second home trend may be here to stay. Driving it is the belief that more positivity can be found away from the chaos of large metros and in more green and healthier places. ■

—with Shelly Anand and Aditi Pai

LEISURE

JAIDEEP AHLAWAT: GETTING HIS ACTS RIGHT PG 57

PABLO BARTHOLOMEW: A PEOPLE'S PHOTOGRAPHER PG 60

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Q&A WITH KARAN SINGH PG 62

> "Women are now in charge of their lives, they are owning their bodies and choices, or at least attempting to do so"

CINEMA

PUTTING LADIES IN THE LEAD

Vidya Balan has been at the vanguard of a new wave of Hindi cinema that puts women first

Photograph by SOHIL LALANI

"I dare say that there isn't much happening in the male actor space," says Vidya Balan. "It is a better time to be a female actor today. Look at the kind of female roles you get to see. Every actress is doing interesting work." Balan is undoubtedly on point here. From Deepika Padukone in *Gehraiyaan* (2022) and Alia Bhatt in *Gangubai Kathiawadi* (2022) to Taapsee Pannu in the upcoming *Shabaash Mithu*, the present ubiquity of female protagonists seems proof that more women are being given the parts they need to flex their acting muscles. Over the years, as Balan won acclaim for performances in films like *The Dirty Picture* (2011) and *Tumhari Sulu* (2017), she championed the cause of female-driven narratives. One might even say it was Balan who helped a small shift build into a sizeable wave.

Even though Balan doesn't see herself as a torchbearer, she has certainly inspired a whole generation of actresses to seek parts that are worthy of their talent. For Pannu, Balan's rise is proof "that [success] can happen despite being so unconventional". She says, "Suddenly, the stories felt different, you had a female POV [point of view], the gaze was different. She isn't your regular diva of Bollywood."

Despite several pressures, Balan has staunchly refused to conform to industry diktats that define who or what a heroine should be. On the rare occasion that she has capitulated, the films have failed to do justice to her prowess. Balan's fame, one sees, has resulted from projects that she approached with an unwavering passion and sincerity. "I get bored very easily, so I am looking for new stories to tell and characters to play all the time," she says. "My work has always been an extension of my beliefs. It's this hunger that propels me forward." That perhaps explains how the actress is able to still make new her portrayal of womanhood's many facets, even 17 years after *Parineeta*, her Hindi film debut.

Balan says her latest film, the drama thriller *Jalsa* (streaming on Amazon Prime Video from March 18), gives her that rare opportunity to "delve into the grey". Balan's character, renowned journalist Maya Menon, is faced with a moral reckoning when her junior colleague (Vidhatri Bandi) inches closer to the truth of a hit-and-run accident. "[Maya] takes great pride in the fact that she chases the truth, no matter what the cost," says Balan. "She is a credible voice in the media but with this accident, she is left feeling confused, scared and insecure. What is fascinating about her is the quandary she is in."

Initially, Balan had turned down director Suresh Triveni when he asked her to play Menon. "I didn't think I had the courage to play her," she says. "But the pandemic changed so much; it made us look at ourselves and life differently. I suddenly had empathy for her." The past two years have also made Balan appreciate the virtues of streaming platforms—the "longevity" they promise, the accessibility they afford vis-à-vis theatres. After *Shakuntala Devi* (2020) and *Sherni* (2021), *Jalsa* is her third consecutive film to opt for an OTT release. "With anything new, there's a lot of uncertainty and lack of understanding, but now people have seen its benefits. I am a prime example of that," admits Balan.

While OTT has ensured that Balan's work gets the audience it merits, it has also given the careers of many actors a new lease of life. One of them is Balan's *Jalsa* co-star, Shefali Shah. Her role in *Delhi Crime* (2019—) was a game-changer, resulting in the actress being busier than she has ever been before. Balan, who, like Shah, started her career in television, has been following her colleague's work: "I'm so glad there are roles worthy of her [talent]. She's being given a wide canvas to paint on."

At 43, Balan, too, is revelling in the opportunities coming her way. This, after all, is a creatively lucrative period for actresses, regardless of their age. "I don't think it is a phase or trend. I think it is here to stay," she says. "That's also because women are now in charge of their lives, they are owning their bodies and choices, or at least attempting to do so." Balan feels roles for women are getting better because they reflect our larger reality—"There is no one prototype of a woman we aspire to anymore." ■

–Suhani Singh

In her latest film Jalsa (streaming on Amazon Prime Video from March 18), **VIDYA BALAN'S** journalist character is faced with a moral reckoning

JAIDEEP AHLAWAT in Bloody Brothers, which will stream on Zee5 (left); and in Amazon Prime's Paatal Lok

ENTERTAINMENT

GETTING HIS ACTS RIGHT

Paatal Lok made him a household name, but **Jaideep Ahlawat** still wants to push the envelope

Growing up in Rohtak, Haryana, Jaideep Ahlawat dreamt of joining the army. But after failing to clear the SSB (Sashastra Seema Bal) exam after several attempts, angry and frustrated, Ahlawat turned to theatre to fill the gnawing void in his life. "At the time, theatre was just a space that helped me get out of that personal quagmire. I still hadn't thought I could be a professional actor. I was just enjoying the process and being on stage," the 41-year-old recalls.

Two decades on, Ahlawat says he still wants to "enjoy the process" when signing on fresh projects, but also wants to try "something new". Fortunately, the Zee5 show *Bloody Brothers*, ticked both boxes. "It's an intriguing script. I remember when I started reading it, I couldn't stop. And then there was the chance to work with Zeeshan (Mohammed Zeeshan Ayyub) and (director) Shaad Ali." An adaptation of BBC's *Guilt* (2019), this dark comedy tells the story of how two brothers mistakenly kill an old man in an accident. "Only when we were shooting did I realise that even in a dark comedy, the characters all go through serious stuff; it is the situation that is funny for the audience."

It has been two years since Ahlawat came into the spotlight as Hathi Ram Chaudhary, the weary and introverted policeman in *Paatal Lok* (2020–). "People in the industry take me more seriously now. This was one character that had all the nine *rasas*, so people started to believe they can bring any kind of character to me now." Though Ahlawat insists that little has changed for him personally since *Paatal Lok*, he does add, "I know that beyond my circle of family and close friends, the behaviour of people has changed. They might not have talked to me before but are now interested in knowing me."

It was 15 years ago that Ahlawat, then a fresh Film and Television Institute of India (FTII) graduate, came to Mumbai. While his early outings—*Khatta Meetha* (2010) and *Aakrosh* (2010)—failed to make an impact, it was his part in *Chittagong* (2012) that helped him get cast as Shahid Khan in *Gangs of Wasseypur* (2012). "Manoj *bhai* (Bajpayee) had recommended me to Anurag Sir (Kashyap). I remember Anurag telling me that once people see the film, they'll want to work with me. I hadn't seen the film, so my immediate reaction was 'really?'" Kashyap was right. Ahlawat has since played key parts in many big-ticket productions like *Raees* (2017) and *Raazi* (2018).

JAIDEEP AHLAWAT WANTS TO ENJOY THE PROCESS OF ACTING BUT WHILE ALWAYS TRYING SOMETHING NEW

Today, while he waits to begin shooting for director Sujoy Ghosh's next film and for the filming of *Paatal Lok's* second season to be announced, Ahlawat is hoping that directors continue to help him push the envelope as an actor. He says, "Something like (Ritwik) Bhowmik's character in *Bandish Bandit* would be a huge challenge for me. It would be very difficult to play a singer, especially a classical singer on screen, if one does not have any musical talent. I would love to try something like that." ■

–Karishma Upadhyay

Image Courtesy: THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART, NEW YORK

ARCHITECTURE

When Less Was More

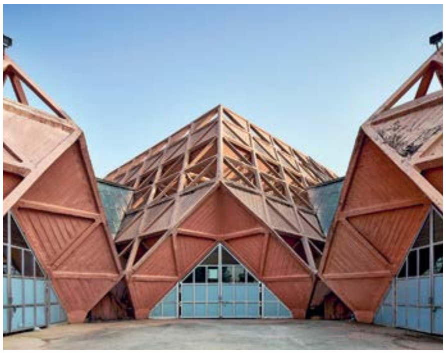
A NEW BOOK AND A MAJOR EXHIBITION IN NEW YORK EXAMINE ARCHITECTURAL MODERNISM AS AN EXPRESSION OF SOUTH ASIAN DECOLONISATION

One of the real problems of making a book out of an exhibition, and vice versa, is the compromised position of the latter. Which came first—the exhibition or the book? When the primary objective is a museum presentation, the book often reads like a catalogue. When the focus is scholarly and academic, the exhibition suffers from excessive wordiness.

MoMA's *Project of Independence*—a book on its present exhibition on Indian Modernism—refuses to fall into either category. It takes Martino Stierli, the primary author, to clearly assess how the goals of the four independent states—India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka—were addressed through an architecture that was a visible symbol of decolonisation and what he terms cultural emancipation. The dams and universities, legislative buildings and offices, theatres and shopping centres, along with their architects—Achyut Kanvinde, Raj Rewal, Charles Correa and B.V. Doshi in India, and others like Minnette de Silva in Sri Lanka and Yasmeen Lari in Pakistan—were recognised as founder-members of an elite club that remained active for the first three decades of Independence. The purity of their modernist conceptions is assiduously catalogued under chapters on cities, institutions, infrastructure, industry, craft, planning, housing and the like.

The success of the project relies in part on the subject matter itself: architecture reduced to such bare-bone austerity, it invites inquiry by its sheer mystical presence. Unlike the exaggerated flash of the subcontinent's general architecture, modernism was so finely subdued into a grey monotone, it required natural forces to offset its rugged forms. Concrete surfaces lit by accidental clerestories, cavernous space that spoke with eloquent silence, such architecture in fact required new classification. Formalism, Structuralism, Brutalism,

THE PROJECT OF INDEPENDENCE
Architectures of Decolonisation in South Asia, 1947-1985
by Martino Stierli, Anoma Pieris, and Sean Anderson (Editors)
MUSEUM OF MODERN ART
₹**5,676; 248** pages



REMNANTS (clockwise from left) New Secretariat Building, Kolkata; NCDC Office Building, Delhi; Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel Municipal Stadium, Ahmedabad; IIT Kanpur walkway; Golconde, Puducherry; and Hall of Nations, Pragati Maidan, Delhi

In the long term, Indian sensibility has refused to accept Modernism as anything but a short-term intrusion into subcontinental culture

call it by whatever name, the geometric forms of Kanvinde's Mehsana dairy, the conical skylights of Correa's Savalcao Church, or the cuboid mass of Doshi's Indology Institute provoked and upturned conventional architectural characteristics of identity, privacy and intimacy and tested them in new light.

The book's premise arises predictably from the title itself. Could a culture freed from colonial rule and the oppressive backdrop of Lutyens's imperious structures forge a new image out of underdevelopment? Was it possible to harness ancient manual techniques into structures that expressed modernist sensibilities? These questions have been asked and answered in confounding pictorial details: Rajasthani women in colourful traditional dress carrying cement up precarious scaffolds; thousands of unskilled labourers on multiple bamboo platforms similarly pouring concrete for a new dam in Telangana. According to Stierli, the difficult bridge between antiquated building practices and modernist approaches defined an ironic hybrid where global and local methods combined to erase national identities and leave each building as a private gift of its own creator.

Even though it developed out of a European vocabulary, the pure form of Indian modernism was short-lived. It spanned the euphoric years of the country's tryst with hope and destiny that directed the politics of a new nation into the cause of untested architecture, quite the reverse of politics that uses architecture to its own end. It is a matter of scathing irony that the Hall of Nations in Delhi—a structure designed by Raj Rewal and lauded as "a purposeful union of modern space and the material culture of manual labour" should be razed without so much as a recall to its architectural value.

In the long term, Indian sensibility has refused to accept Modernism as anything but a short-term intrusion into subcontinental culture. Even today, the value of modernism, despite its enormous spread and reach, appears only as an ambivalent apology to architectural history. What remains are the subsequent years of multiple mutations—bus terminals and train stations in small towns, ramshackle office buildings and plastered housing projects (rising to three four storeys). It is they that are the final remnants of the modernist imagination.

The book is a useful record of a lost cause. However, its isolation of India and the subcontinent in the history of modernism is both incomprehensible and incomplete. The necessity of tying the architectural narrative to Independence and development doubtless required a clear descriptive logic, but it gives the art of India's modernist buildings a less substantive world perspective. What transpired in Brazil, Mexico, France, Switzerland and parts of Africa at the time would—if pieced together—provide a valuable insight on the universality of an idea that spawned multiple expressions. ■

(The Project of Independence *is on view at New York's Museum of Modern Art until July 2)*

–Gautam Bhatia

PHOTOGRAPHY

A PEOPLE'S PHOTOGRAPHER

The lens with which **Pablo Bartholomew** has shot Naga tribes is both intimate and humanistic

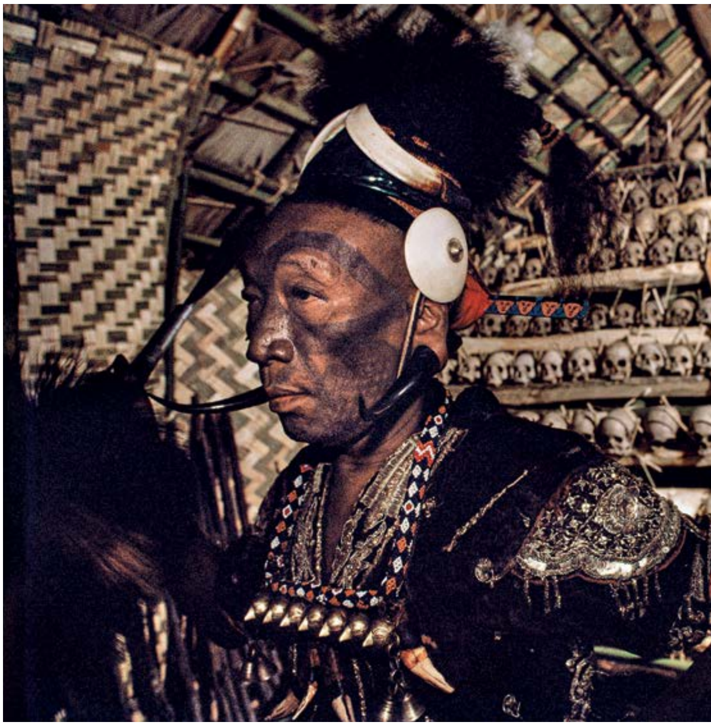


Image Courtesy: PABLO BARTHOLOMEW

A CELEBRATION (clockwise from left) Pablo Bartholomew; The Ang of Shingachinyu Village (Apr. 1988); and Naga girls in western-style dresses made from traditional Naga weave, Kohima (May 1997)

A

A Naga chieftain of the Konyak tribe stands in front of his skull hut, the mounds of *memento mori* hinting at his peoples' historical association with head-hunting. Clad in Lohe (an Angami Naga shawl with stripes), a village woman carries wood for cooking. Traditional houses in the Willong village remain untouched by 20th century modernity. Pablo Bartholomew's *The Nagas* offers us an ethnographic glimpse of a community we barely know, but beyond ritual and daily life, his pictures also capture something more—aspiration.

Bartholomew's curiosity about the Naga tribes was piqued in childhood. He remembers his father, Richard Bartholomew, telling him stories of how he had escaped to Naga territory during the Japanese occupation of Burma in WW-II. Bartholomew's father, a photographer and art critic, finally settled down in Delhi. "Memory is strange," Bartholomew says. "Some bits get lost and then they come back in an intense manner years later. After my father died in 1985 at a fairly young age of 58, there were so many unanswered questions, and one of them was his escape from Burma in greater detail."

It was in 1989 that Bartholomew made his first long trip to the Naga region, but then, in an effort to rediscover his Burmese roots, he kept returning to villages in the area for another decade. Here he made friends, finding hope and succour in their stories of resilience. Many of the 72 photographs in this show are marked by an unsettling sense of calm and stillness. Seen together, they tell a story of strife and violence which years of ethnic conflict, warfare and insurgency have wrought. For Bartholomew, his journeys were dangerous but satisfying: "I think any time in the Northeastern hills and valleys is bad. But I took the risk for my ideas and quest."

PABLO BARTHOLOMEW'S *The Nagas* is on display at Mumbai's Nine Fish Art Gallery until March 24

Like his idol, the underrated photojournalist Kishor Parekh, Bartholomew's lens is intimate and humanistic, swinging deftly between documentary and anthropological realism. The most unique portraits in the show, however, are those that capture the indigenous fashion of the Naga people. One man has antelope horns dangling from his earlobe, while another has opted for a discarded battery. Elsewhere, Bartholomew chronicles a society on the cusp of change. Caught between tradition and modernity, the Naga youth, Bartholomew finds, are searching for their own voice. His project seems to argue that far from being monolithic, the Naga identity is, in fact, a glorious celebration of diversity. The 30-odd tribes in the Naga terrain, for instance,

are believed to speak at least 60 dialects.

Bartholomew was still an adolescent when he dropped out of high school to become a roving photographer. He was in his 30s when he started work on *The Nagas*. His prize-winning career has spanned several watershed events of our nation such as the Bhopal gas tragedy, anti-Sikh riots and the Babri demolition. Now, at 66, he says photography for him was never just the one thing: "It was a combination of many things—interest, desire, an escape vehicle, therapy, compulsion and necessity." ■

–Shaikh Ayaz

PHOTOGRAPHY

Through the Lens, Clearly

Vinay Sheel Oberoi's photos of the Monpa people bring us closer to an otherwise distant community

Posted in the Northeast after qualifying for the Indian Administrative Service in 1979, the late Vinay Sheel Oberoi's initial, chance connection with the region grew into a great love. Told through a collection of over 250 photographs, and accompanied by an informative and expressive eight-chapter text, *Monpas: Buddhists of the High Himalayas*, Oberoi's 200-page documentation of the people and their place, the Kameng region of Arunachal Pradesh, is the result of journeys both big and small, of serendipitous moments that spanned decades.

Documenting the life of a people is not an easy task, especially when the community is both distinct and distant from the 'mainstream'. The idea for the book crystallised after an exhibition in 2018 in Delhi. Once the photographs had been displayed at the India International Centre, the exhibition travelled to the place where it all started—Tawang, Arunachal Pradesh. The process of bringing it all together began when Roli Books decided to publish the photos as a book. Sadly, Oberoi passed away in April 2020.

As the introduction explains, "These were travels for more than a few reasons: a renaissance for a film in the making (yet to be made), an expedition to where my wife lived as a child [her father had been posted there in 1962 as an officer in the Indian Frontier Administrative Service], a trip to investigate temperate and monopodial bamboo, and a memorable series of visits for motor rallies. The list grew longer and more varied; any and every opportunity would do." These, along with a growing interest in photography, however, might not have been quite enough had Oberoi not also been gifted with an eye for the unusual, an ear for stories and a historian's ability to stitch together narratives.

The book is a gentle and luminous look into the life of a very special people, their habitat, culture and traditions. Even as Oberoi observed the landscapes shifting with the change in seasons, he forged many connections with the people there: "It was a glorious afternoon in Dirang and the sun shone brilliantly across the valley. I sat with a village elder as he ruminated on days gone by. Every so often, he would take a sip of arrah, freshly made and still warm. 'When I was young,' he said wistfully, 'Monpa houses were made of timber, bamboo and stone. Not a nail, not a glass window.'"

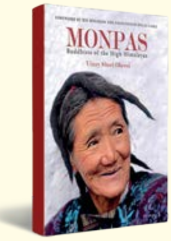
In an effort to preserve a centuries-old craft, mastered only by a few families in the village of Mukto, Oberoi, who had also worked with UNESCO in Paris, had even tried to set up a handmade paper (traditionally used for scriptures and monastic records) unit. A single sheet of this paper has been included in the book.

In his foreword, His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama speaks of "the knowledge of *ahimsa* and *karuna* that so strongly permeate Monpa culture". Our increasingly fractured world would do well to listen. ■

–Elizabeth Eapen

Vinay Sheel Oberoi's book is a gentle and luminous look into the life of a very special people, their habitat, culture and traditions

▲ **Documenting Monpa culture** (from top) a couple drinking *chhang*; and a performance of the yak dance



MONPAS
Buddhists of the
High Himalayas
by Vinay Sheel Oberoi
ROLI BOOKS
₹2,995; 200 pages

Q+A

IN SHIVA HE TRUSTS

At 91, **Dr Karan Singh** is equally devoted to politics and scholarship, but editing the recently released *Shiva: Lord of the Cosmic Dance* was for him an expression of a more personal piety

Q. Compared to other gods and goddesses, is Shiva an easier deity to theorise?
In some ways, he was more difficult to theorise. Other gods fitted neatly into the Vedic pantheon, but Shiva was always the outsider. The way he dressed, smoked, ate–was totally outside, totally beyond the normal. In the end, I think what led to him being accepted is the fact that he was all-encompassing.

Q. Given our strong tradition of Shaivism, isn't it odd that we do so little for those on the margins?
Yes, that's a national weakness. We have never had enough empathy for the backward. It doesn't matter if for the past 75 years we have tried to abolish poverty, Covid has pushed many crores back into the lower income status. Even though this might have little to do with Shiva, he represents them too.

Q. So, in a world that is being ravaged by Covid and war, how relevant is Shiva, the God of Death?
Shiva has two Tandavas. First is Ananda Tandava, which sees him dancing in bliss and bringing the world into being. His Vinasha Tandava, on the other hand, destroys everything. A nuclear war, for instance, could do that. So, all we can do is to pray to him and say, "Please never shoot us with that arrow you hold".

Q. Finally, how much of a role should religion play in politics, do you think?
Rather, we must ask how much of a part is it already playing. I like to find my answers in all-encompassing Vedantic philosophy. There's no exclusion there.

–with Shreevatsa Nevatia

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